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VOL. 2900.

IN THE SUNTIME OF HER YOUTH.

BY

BEATRICE WHITBY.

IN TWO VOLUMES. — VOL. 2.

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REGIA
MONACENSIS

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SUNTIME OF HER YOUTH

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BEATRICE WHITBY,

AUTHOR OF "THE AWAKENING OF MARY FENWICK," ETC.

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BERNHARD TAUCHNITZ

1893.

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IN THE

SUNTIME OF HER YOUTH.

CHAPTER I.

"I live for those who love me,
For those who know me true;
For the heaven that smiles above me
And awaits my spirit too.
For the cause that lacks assistance,
For the wrong that needs resistance,
For the future in the distance,
And the good that I can do."

For many long weeks Nat had worn Her Majesty's uniform. For many long weeks Major Wyndham had been stationary at the rectory. For many long weeks his friendship had been growing, widening, deepening at Hillsden. He seemed to covet the Trevor friendship; they freely

and lavishly bestowed it upon him. He had become a favourite, intimate, and useful friend of the family. Though Major Wyndham was a rather quiet man, observant, contemplative, fonder of listening than speaking, yet he was by no means passive: he liked to conjugate an active verb—he liked "to do," and to do some good; to help, to give a lift-up somewhere, anywhere, if he thought a lift-up would be beneficial; he liked to play, he told himself, at philanthropy. It is a game which it is not easy to play well. The "poor things" who ask, do not want; the "poor things" who do not ask, do not get.

Major Wyndham went in and out of Hillsden at all hours of the day; he allowed Celia to bully him or to worship him as it pleased her, he spoilt Elsie, he was ready to pace with Mrs. Trevor in the garden or to sit and talk to her in the house, he identified himself with the Trevor interests, effaced himself when he was not wanted. He was a rare acquisition to the household; life had brightened for them all since he came.

When the daughters of the house are fair to see, such sprouting friendships have been known to spring to birth and flourish—a mushroom

growth, a puff-ball which collapses as lightly as it grew. Such friendships have been known to increase and become grasping, to rob, give no more, but annex.

The neighbours understood, or thought they understood, the meaning of this intimacy.

Elsie had advanced a thousand degrees in favour with her brother-in-law; he did not doubt that she was about to do well for herself, therefore it behoved all men to speak well of her. Major Wyndham was for ever at Hillsden—he preferred that poverty-stricken establishment to the Oaks; he had tea—tea with skim milk in it, bread with salt butter spread upon it, at Hillsden; he loitered in that wilderness of a garden; he must be a lost man, his intentions must indeed be serious and matrimonial. Mr. Hacket felt kindly towards Elsie, for Major Wyndham was a distinguished soldier, of unimpeachable family and connection, the only son of a father who had a very tidy income of his own, and who, curiously enough, encouraged the courtship and made much of this singularly fortunate Miss Trevor.

Mr. and Mrs. Hacket were taking their morning potter round their inextensive, but highly

cultivated domain; he, with his eyes upon the gravel, the new gravel which was firmly ground into a concrete walk, was turning over a project —a prodigal but, perchance, a profitable project— in his mind.

The yellow path, zigzagging, engineered like the tail of Alice's mouse, led through a young plantation which was stocked with baby shrubs and hobbledehoy trees from foreign climes, that were struggling to take up the thread of their existence in an uncongenial soil. Agnes was looking at these tame and callow nurslings. She was ready, metaphorically speaking, to take her hat off and stand bare-headed before a monarch of the forest, with lichen growing on its withered branch, with a crest torn and battered by the storm of centuries, with gnarled and furrowed back, but to admire these fledglings as their proprietor admired them was the result of duty, not instinct. She had her eyes upon the leader of a deodara, she was prepared to discuss its condition, but Mr. Hacket's mind roved—the circumstance was unique—from home.

"Elsie is riding with Major Wyndham this morning."

"Yes, I know; they have gone to Otterton."

"They ride together a great deal."

"Yes."

"Elsie has improved, she is extremely handsome. How old is she?"

"Eighteen. How well that catalpa looks, Mortimer."

"Wyndham, I have no doubt, is serious, Agnes, I have no doubt myself of his honourable intentions; but this riding about the country without a chaperon is——"

"You forget he is an old friend."

"An old friend, but a new—lover, Agnes. I can never discuss your family without your becoming argumentative. Surely, I may do what I can for you and yours. After your brother's disgrace, under the whole circumstances, I should like Wyndham to see that one member of your family is in an assured and affluent position."

"He knows all that is to be known about us, Mortimer."

"He knows extremely little about me," said Mr. Hacket, blandly, "and I should like him to know more."

"He comes here very often, Mortimer, you see him."

"I see him, but I wish to do more than see. I wish to entertain him. Don't hurry on, we have time to spare, the day is before us. As I have said, I want to do my best to help Elsie; it is our duty, Agnes, to bring matters to a climax."

From brow to chin Agnes flushed, her lips straightened.

"I know the world," he went on; "age has taught me many things of which you are naturally ignorant; something of cause and effect," smiling. "We will give a dinner, I have plenty of wine in the cellar, the '34 port wants drinking. We have been asked out a good deal, (though we haven't accepted our invitations,) it is time that we returned hospitality. Wyndham shall come and Elsie shall come."

"Give a dinner," said Agnes, speaking quickly; "but not for that reason, not for Elsie's sake. She would hate to be thought of like that; it is not—nice."

"You are young, my pet," he answered, smiling still. "Full of pretty sentiment, just as you should be, so I will let it pass. And you shall

have your dinner, and we will show people how these things should be done. The sooner the better; delay, dawdling on is very unsatisfactory, even dangerous. Major Wyndham is in request everywhere, and may be a gay Lothario, for aught we know."

Agnes was standing still and looking about her.

"I wish we had one good tree in the place," she said.

"There are rare trees and costly trees in this plantation." She had caught his attention now.

"I like hardy trees that flourish, not costly trees which pine; a variegated maple is as frightful as a piebald horse. I like old trees or none."

"The way to obtain old trees is to plant young; it may be foolish, but I spend my money to prepare pleasure for future generations. I like," —he took her hand, which was hanging at her side, and held it in his own—"I like to hear you say you appreciate age, Agnes, in trees, or anything."

His wife was whimsical, contradictory; for now when he talked of trees, she was ready to return to the vexed question of the dinner-party.

She talked of the prospective entertainment with interest, she agreed to all his propositions concerning it, but she said again that it was to be a dinner-party without a purpose.

"Certainly, certainly; we will keep our own counsel. It shall have no purpose, beyond that of providing an excuse for a smart new frock apiece for you and for your sister. I am willing to provide them both. Nonsense, Agnes, don't shake your head. Elsie is really out at elbows; she must do us credit. The principal outlaid in clothing for a handsome girl is principal well invested. A good dress-maker wins more hearts than a galaxy of cardinal virtues. Trust me, my dear; I know the ways of men."

It did not seem to the hearer that such an acquaintanceship was an advantage.

"I think," she answered, slowly, "that Elsie wants nothing invested or won for her."

"You are prejudiced in your sister's favour. She is handsome, no doubt, but too opinionated, independent, and hasty to be overwhelmingly attractive."

Agnes did not fall in with Mr. Hacket's plans as readily as he had anticipated she would do;

her opposition naturally settled the question, this dinner-party he would certainly give; it was a speculation, all his speculations were lucky.

"We can dine twenty comfortably; I will make a list of those people whom I wish invited; the invitation must be a long one so as to secure them. They will come, if possible, just to see how I do these things. Mark my words, I know the world."

Agnes assented; it was her habit to assent, but her cheeks were still flushed. If her husband knew the world so well, how little he understood sundry of its inhabitants. When he went off to his library to work out his dinner-party, guests, *menu,* cost, in black and white, she turned away and pottered on alone through the morning sunshine. The hours were not so endless as of yore, or she had grown more used to the length of them; she thought of the impending dinner-party and of the dress which she should wear; at Hillsden the clouds had lightened, the girls were merry enough, the reflection of their brightness fell upon her, "grief was no longer the business of her life." The sun shone, the flowers grew, the world was not all shadow, it was easier to be

content with her lot, friends came and went, and friendship was "as light and music are."

Agnes was no analyst, no cautious pryer into, and sifter of, her feelings. She had the childish attribute of living in the present,—a sweet and bitter weakness. If grief came, she was no philosopher to look ahead, around, and argue herself placid; the grief was acute, hopeless, overwhelming as that of a child. She did not inquire why the gloom had passed from her spirits, she wanted no reasons, no explanation. She had never been exuberantly or riotously merry in her life, she was not joyous now, but life was no longer so difficult, so tiring, it was worth living. People were very kind to her,—kindness is the cordial of existence. They were, indeed, most kind; she would go indoors and sing the song which Arthur Wyndham had sent her that morning: a German song, a simple easy song such as her untrained voice could master. She was but half-way through the book he had lent her; she must finish it, for Elsie had asked for it impatiently, she was waiting for her turn. Elsie was greedy; how could she find time to read? she rode and talked and walked away her days.

Agnes had pottered long enough. She was retracing her steps to the house when she, on turning the corner of the shrubbery, encountered a very insignificant item of her establishment. Mr. Hacket was not an easy master to serve, his servants were his servants and "they were nothing more;" he did not encourage Agnes to interest herself in anything but the way in which their work was performed, they were labouring machines to be worked by wages, not over-oiled and clogged by indulgence.

Mr. Hacket would have no cottage-visiting, the risk of infection was too great, he said, and promiscuous charity was a crying evil, to be suppressed. But when Agnes met Jim, poor Jim, the weed-boy of the garden, the errand-boy of the kitchen, the odd lad in the stables, the jack-o'-all-trades whom everyone scolded, and everyone employed, when she met this social martyr with tears running down his dirty face, she stopped to ask what was the matter. She had thought the boy a stoic, stolidly indifferent alike to the many kicks and few ha'pence he received, but now he was a grievous sight, with a round face all dirt and tears, and when his mistress addressed him

he rubbed his muddy knuckles in his wet eyes and blurted out a dreary story.

"His father was"—as unfortunately, is common with fathers in starvation-homes—"on the drink, his mother was took bad, and Jim"—here was the bitterest part of the story—"was to tell the master that there was nothing in the house and nothing coming in but his wages, which, as his father bid him say, were gone twice over in shoe leather to and fro."

Jim's father was a ne'er-do-weel, by trade a woodman, whose cottage was a mile from Dorfold, standing alone on the road-side. It was hard to find a village-boy who would come to the Oaks for the wages offered, but Jim came on the principle that "the poor shall remain the poor."

"What is the matter with your mother, Jim?"

"The cough, m'm, and all-overish. The little 'uns do fret, we'd naught but a turnop for dinner yesterday. Mother said if you knew'd of her trouble, you'd come. You used to come up many a time,—she's terrible low."

Jim was cheering up, he was so thankful to have met his mistress in lieu of his master, it was easy to tell her, no one could look in her face

and doubt that she deplored the turnip-dinner, the drink, the sickness.

"A little pudden, or some'at of that, m'm," suggested the small boy, encouraged by her attitude, "something to hearten her up. 'If you knew'd,' she said, 'you'd come quick enough,' but mother's nothing at asking. 'Beggars don't starve,' she says, 'but quiet folks do.' She was crying, m'm."

"Does Mr. Wyndham know, Jim?"

"Father's set against the rector, m'm; they've had words, many a time, and mother said, 'Go to the master, Jim, as go you must. Miss Agnes would have given away the last crust she had; I don't believe but what she'll give still."

Jim was heaving the weight off his own to his mistress' shoulders.

"I will go and see your mother, Jim. I will try what I can do."

Nine women out of ten would, under the circumstances, have gone straight to their cook and ordered soup and pudding to be made at once; but Agnes was the tenth and the exception. She went to her husband. This was highly moral conduct, but Agnes was never allowed to forget

that he, not she, was the proprietor of the larder. Mr. Hacket examined each detail, each tiniest item of the household expenditure,—and Agnes sighed over the coming difficult tussel which she foresaw as she promised Jim, "I will try." A tussel of any sort was abhorrent to her.

Mr. Hacket had prepared the list of guests for his dinner-party, and was half-way through the *menu;* he was his most genial, complacent self, he smiled at Agnes when he saw her.

"Ah! I knew the hostess would be impatient to know all about her function," he said, much amused. "There is the list, my dear, behind you on the table, and I'm sketching out the *menu,* but you won't understand all that."

Agnes took up the list and scanned it in silence.

"Um—yes—very nice," she said; she was wringing her hands nervously, her colour changing, her eyes on the sheet of paper, she had not seen one name upon the roll. "But I came about something else—about the Stones, Mortimer, they are in such distress. Jim has just told me, his mother is ill, his father out of work, they are in great want, they are indeed."

Mr. Hacket listened, not frowning, still genial and pleased.

"The boy is a beggar," he said, "I thought as much. An unsatisfactory lad, Sandy complained of him this morning; he shall leave my service."

"He did not beg, he was crying. I asked him what was wrong."

"Am I to keep the family while Stone drinks away his wages? Oh, I know all about it, you are so easily taken in. I do not encourage vice, or give a premium on idleness."

"But the woman, Mortimer, she is not to blame."

"A woman should count the cost before she marries a scamp."

"She is ill. I thought a little pudding would do her good. Cook would make it; it would not cost you sixpence."

Agnes spoke so simply, so childishly, it was not worth while to be angry with her persistency.

"I am not talking of the cost, but of the principle of the thing."

"So am I, Mortimer; it is of the principle I

speak. No one could allow a woman to starve on principle."

This remark was clear, energetically spoken, earnestly spoken. He frowned.

"There can be no question of starvation in this parish. Dorfold is pauperised by charity—so-called. Let her apply for relief in the proper quarter. Wyndham is paid to look after his people. The boy shall go; I'm sick of him. These thriftless sort of families for ever drain one's pockets."

"Do you intend to send Jim away at such a time as this?"

"If ever I hear of his grumbles and complaints, if ever I hear of his begging from you, or any other member of my household, he shall go at a moment's notice."

Mr. Hacket was not angry, he was merely firm; anger would have been justifiable at such an unpalatable interruption; he was interested in his *menu* and his plans, and his wife showed no sympathy, but brought a cock-and-bull story about want and starvation, sticking to her point obstinately, ignoring his scheme for the promotion of her sister. Then, turning on her heel, she

was about to leave the room. He called after her,

"Where are you going to?"

"I am going to apply for relief in the proper quarter," she answered.

Dense he might be, but there was no mistaking those tones, they were neither docile nor gentle; she was vexed at not getting her own way, at not playing the Lady Bountiful indiscriminately with his money. He had spoilt her; it was his fault. He smiled indulgently at her white face.

"You are going down to the rectory?"

"Where else *can* I go?"

"It is a long walk, and I want you here; but I know how fond you are of flying off on wild-goose chases. So go."

And she went. Her face was hot, a rebellious face, and though the children at the lodge bobbed and grinned eagerly at her as she passed, she had no word, nothing but the ghost of a smile to give them in return for their greeting.

"How easy heads get turned, to be sure," their mother said, seriously annoyed at Mrs. Hacket's absence of mind. "A year back Miss

Agnes was as free as free could be. In and out, taking notice of Bill and 'Liza, and any child about. Since her were married her ain't scarce put foot inside a cottage, and as for close-fisted, the master himself could not beat her. Well, well, 'taint a very comfortable partner she's got, for all his money; no gentleman in him, as any blind baby could tell."

Late that evening, when Mr. Hacket was dozing snugly behind the *Times,* his wife got up from the piano, and, going over to the side of his chair, laid her hand upon his shoulder.

"I am sorry I was cross, Mortimer," she said.

It was rather a silly way of apologising,—how appallingly youthful she looked in her white dress, with a white fillet of ribbon bound round her dark hair, and her clear, soft eyes looking deprecatingly into his.

"Were you cross, my pet? You are fanciful. I did not notice it."

She held tightly to his arm. Was it possible he had not known she had been a red-hot rebel at heart? The unwonted anger, which had shocked and surprised her by its power, by its presence, had been invisible to him.

"How good you have always been to me," she said; her voice was so low that he did not catch her words, but he kissed her hand; then his head nodded forward, and he dozed again. Her appeased conscience dozed too.

CHAPTER II.

Violets plucked, the sweetest rain
Makes not fresh, nor grow again.
FLETCHER.

THE following afternoon Mrs. Hacket paid a flying visit to Hillsden, for she had a long drive before her; her husband was going into the distant county town to buy cards for and make inquiries in connection with the impending dinner-party; but on the next day, Sunday, Agnes, as was her weekly custom, entertained her relations in her own house.

It was a cold afternoon; the quartette were gathered round the fire. Mrs. Trevor, in the seat nearest the fireside, looking worn and ill, leant back against the cushions where her daughter had placed her. It was a question whether she heard the tongues which plied around her. Her eyes were tired, weary eyes which had seen enough, and were ready to close for ever upon smiles and tears alike; her ears were dull of hearing.

Celia was stretched upon the rug; she had taken off her hat and propped her head against her eldest sister's knee; her hair was in dangerous proximity to the flames, her cheeks were toasted scarlet, she yawned contentedly from time to time.

Agnes had not told her little scraps of news abroad; she had not mentioned the dinner-party; she watched Elsie, watched her with wonder and surprise; for Elsie, of all the women in the world, was out of spirits, and inclined to snap the head off anyone who was at all aggressive.

"Is Arthur coming this afternoon?"

The furrow in Elsie's forehead deepened.

"Of course," shortly; "doesn't he always come?"

"You are not fit to be spoken to," said Precautia. "You are as cross as two sticks, Arthur said so."

Agnes' searching eyes were compassionate, for Elsie's rigid lips quivered.

"I was annoyed with him, for he will come in the morning when I am busy, Agnes; then Precautia won't look at her lessons, and nothing gets done. It is tiresome to be always interrupted."

This was an odd view, a curious way of speaking, induced by what? By pique?—by what? Agnes had no experience to guide her judgment.

"Fiddlesticks!" said the candid Celia. "You have only thought of that because you had to invent some excuse for your temper. Arthur never comes unless he is obliged. He brings something, or a message; he never comes for pleasure, he explains that."

"Then he is most punctilious about doing his duty," returned Elsie, drily; "as he says, duty is all he ever did."

This way of speaking of a friend—of such a friend—was sacrilegious.

> "To be wroth with one we love,
> Doth work like madness in the brain."

Mr. Hacket had often pointed out Elsie's shortcomings; his wife was ready, at this moment, to accept his words as the truth. Precautia, looking up, saw her face.

"Elsie doesn't mean all that; she'd quarrel with her shadow this afternoon. On other days she loves Arthur, and wants to ride with him

badly; they talk for hours. She always talks about herself, and he listens."

"That is not my fault," said the accused, tartly. "You know what Arthur is; he is interested in everything, and leads one on to be egotistical. I begin to talk of him, I try to talk of him, but I always find I'm talking of my own concerns, and he is listening. I tell him all sorts of stupid things, and he remembers them better than I remember them myself."

Agnes nodded her head; her lips relaxed into a smile.

"Yes," she answered, softly, "that is like him."

"It spoils one—hark, there is the bell; he is coming. Now Precautia will be happy."

The little girl did not disown the "soft impeachment."

"Except Gumbo, Arthur is the nicest person in the world, and when he goes back to India I shall go too. Only I don't know how to pay the journey."

Then Major Wyndham came into the room. He was bronzed and thin still, but his arm was out of its sling and on duty again; the wounds

of battle were healed, the scars fading. His manner was extremely friendly, with the easy intimacy of a long-standing friendship, with the hail-fellow-well-met familiarity of the *fin du siècle* youth.

He had a great deal to say to his hostess and to Mrs. Trevor; it was some time before he turned to Elsie, whom he addressed soothingly, his dark eyes laughing while his mouth was grave.

"How is Gumbo, Elsie?" he asked, "and the other black dog? I asked my father to bring black dogs into his sermon this morning, but he would say nothing. He advised me to do preaching myself; an individual, not congregational, sermon is the most impressive, he says."

"You have done it nicely," she said,—her voice fell flat, there was no vivacity in her beautiful face—"and Precautia has been clerk, and said amen. Precautia is your echo, Arthur, so we get all your *bonmots* and sermons and words of wisdom in duplicate."

"She is pleased to be satirical at our expense, Precautia; we have done her no good. Let sleeping dogs lie, we must amuse ourselves without her.—Mrs. Hacket, I have a message

for you from my father. The Stones are on the mend, the man sober, the woman satisfied, the family going strong."

"I heard; Jim told me—everything."

"What! Did you hear of my visit? I happened to be passing the cottage, so I went in; the woman's tongue drove me out very soon,—what a powerful weapon it is—I retreated in disorder. People who have no strength of mind or body, have the muscles of Hercules in their tongues, as often as not."

"In a war of words would you get V. C., Arthur?" asked Precautia, saucily.

But Agnes knew that Major Wyndham backed away from allusion to his honours, and she said,

"Hush, Celia, I want to hear about those poor people. Is it true they are so poor?"

"Destitute," shortly.

"But not now," smiling approval into his serious face. "Jim told me they are not destitute now."

"Did you give them something, Arthur?"

"I did, Precautia."

"Mortimer calls 'giving' pauperising."

"Mr. Hacket is right," he answered, deploring

the painful flush upon the gentle face at which he looked. "Promiscuous charity, my father says, is a fatal form of self-indulgence. It's so much easier to give than to refuse to give; one does harm that way. I respect a man who can turn his back on a beggar. I can't; it's want of back-bone."

"Do you think beggars are generally wicked, Arthur?"

"The authorities say they prefer begging to working."

Precautia meditated a moment; then she said, decidedly,

"I'd rather beg than work myself."

"Just so. Yours is one of those little weaknesses of human nature which it is the duty of your fellow-man to correct. Your fellow-man will not countenance a weakness which may touch him in his tenderest part, his pocket."

Elsie had retreated to the far end of the room, and was sitting on the arm of a chair with an open photograph-book upon her knee; here she broke uninvited into the conversation.

"Arthur has been moralising all day; he has such a niggling little mind, Agnes. He's in a

commander-in-chief mood, and it's no use screaming out 'halts' and 'quick march' to us, so he does the next best thing."

"*Mea culpa*, Elsie; I'm quite ready to be scapegoat."

Agnes, with puzzled eyes, looked from one to the other. Elsie was as unamiable as the gentleman was serene. She bent again over the photographs, and Major Wyndham turned to Mrs. Trevor.

"That fire is very hot," he said; he had caught the tone in which Agnes addressed her mother—a softened, gentle tone, half-reverent, half-protecting. "Will you have this screen, Mrs. Trevor?"

Mrs. Trevor took the screen—as she took all things, evil and good, which came in her way—with indifference, and toyed with it, absently, in her thin hands.

"When you are rested, mother, I want you to come and see the flowers."

Mrs. Trevor looked up, her eyes were dull and dazed.

"The poinsettias are lovely, mother."

"Are they, my dear? But I am tired; I think I will stay where I am for the present."

Elsie shut up her book with a bang and rose to her feet.

"*I* want to see the poinsettias!" she said. "I want to go out; this room is so hot."

Naturally, it was concluded that Major Wyndham would also find the room hot, and go to see poinsettias too; but he did nothing of the sort. He was within, and well within a comfortable chair; the fire-light played on his dark face, the scar showed deep, and had not the source of this disfigurement been glorious, the seam down his worn forehead would have been deemed a blemish to the comeliness of his kindly face.

Agnes looked expectantly upon him, but as he remained where he was and made no remark, she rose and turned to her sister.

"Come then, Elsie; but if the room is hot, it's cold enough outside."

She led the way in silence and shivered in the keen wind. How could she help being annoyed with her companion who wantonly wounded a friend? Elsie, the favourite of the gods, turned her arrogant shoulder upon the goods provided

for her. Let her look to herself, let her give up this foolish, unkind game of indifference, it might be played too often, she might alienate the love of many, she might become her own destruction. A mistake was a small evil in itself, but its consequences might involve irretrievable disaster.

"I don't like poinsettias," said that unamiable young person, stalking about the conservatory, with her hands behind her back and her nose wrinkled up discontentedly. "I like reality in everything; a poinsettia is foliage and not a flower. It's an impostor, so is an orchid."

Agnes did not pretend to be interested in horticulture. Though she bent down and looked into the scarlet heart of an "impostor."

"Elsie," her voice broke from her loudly, almost harshly, she was angry again, and not used to the emotion. "Why have you quarrelled with him?"

Elsie started and moved a pace away.

"I haven't quarrelled at all," she answered, defiantly. "I haven't answered yet."

"What is the matter? Oh, but I know you so well. I know something is wrong."

"He won't,"—her eyes swimming in tears, her voice choked,—"come for Christmas."

"For Christmas? Did you ask him?"

"Yes; it hardly seemed worth while to ask him, I thought he would be certain to come. Now that you have gone, one wants him more than ever."

"Why won't he come?" Agnes felt the starchiness of the manner, Elsie grated on her.

"He is going to that new uncle again. He likes him very much and he likes the daughter, she is clever and she reminds him of you, Aggie. I wish *you*," persuasively, "would write and ask him to come. He always does everything that you ask him to do."

Agnes thought in silence, staring into Elsie's sorrowful face.

"I don't know which uncle. I didn't know he had an uncle, Elsie. Surely he won't leave home for Christmas?"

"But he will, he wrote to me yesterday. And you do know about the uncle, I told you weeks ago, when I first heard of him. And he's very rich, and he's *cal*, as Precautia calls it. Geological, astronomical, chemical, electrical, and all the

other cals. Max met him at a lecture and now they are always together, for ever together, they find out things together. Colonel St. Maur lives in London. Why are you laughing?"

"You were talking of *Max?*"

"Well?"

"You never mentioned his name. I didn't understand."

"No, I can't understand either," eagerly. "I fancy he thinks we don't want him. He knows about the bills and dear old Nat, he may think we would rather be alone this Christmas. Max is very thoughtful—*if* he thinks."

When the sisters re-entered the drawing-room they were linked arm-in-arm, and were, both of them, in good spirits; the poinsettias had been a success.

"We thought you were never coming back," Precautia said; "it is time to go, Mortimer has been in here, and Arthur is going to stay on for tea, and see the stables."

"We must go," said Elsie, "the time has galloped, as it always does when I'm with Agnes."

"And you have talked it off, I see."

"Talked what off?"

"The distressing news the postman brought you yesterday."

Elsie was irritable no longer, she smiled a wide and beautiful smile, and said banteringly,

"Let sleeping dogs lie, as you said. You are too fond of jumping to conclusions, you are interested in all sorts of stupid little things, Arthur."

"You are the 'stupid little thing,' if you'll allow me to quote, in which I am interested. And I jump to no conclusions. There is no need for jumping. I can stroll, in broad daylight, to the fullest conclusion. In the neighbourhood of Precautia there are no mysteries and no reserves."

Precautia pouted; the truth spoken in jest are two good things spoilt, she thought.

"Arthur is a bully to-day—he would not let me follow you, Aggie, he said you would rather be without me, and he wouldn't let me laugh at the other Mrs. Hacket in the photograph-book. I wasn't laughing at her, only at her spoon-bonnet and her crinoline——"

The speech was interrupted by Mr. Hacket's entrance. He was very civil to the whole assembly, but he singled out Elsie for special favour; he

asked her whether she had received his invitation for the dinner-party, and was astounded to hear that she had not done so. Then he tendered his invitation to her and to Major Wyndham by word of mouth; and his wife winced as he did so, she sat on thorns, she was manifestly uneasy, wondering what was coming next.

How thin-skinned she had grown! If Major Wyndham discovered that he was a desirable match for her sister, and that Mr. and Mrs. Hacket thought so, what then? What disgrace in a practical plan? The Trevors were, though people had not guessed it in the past, a practical family. Had she not been practical, mercenary herself? Did not Major Wyndham know it? Of course he knew it, knew what the world knew, believed what the world believed. But no one, save Mrs. Hacket herself, knew the truth, no one but Agnes knew how hard it had been to be practical, how bitter as gall had been the cup she had elected to drink. No, not bitter, that was an exaggeration—tasteless, she meant, wearisome, unsatisfying. God knew she had had to suffer for her practicality, and as yet she had received no reward.

Perhaps Arthur did not think badly of her; perhaps he did understand; he treated her as though he understood, even now he had changed the subject which she dreaded, and was going away out of her presence so that she might breathe freely again. She was glad when he was gone, she hated to find herself dreading the sound of her husband's voice. What right had she to judge what he should say or how he should say it, and yet how on earth was she to avoid doing so? They have gone now, and that was well.

Agnes suggested that she would walk as far as the gate with Mrs. Trevor, and, sending the young ones on ahead, she followed slowly with her mother leaning upon her arm. Agnes was conscious of some slight change for the better in Mrs. Trevor's manner. As they crossed the hall together the bright lamp-light fell on her face, it was flushed,—by the heat of the fire, no doubt, —her eyes were brighter, yes, they were animated, but, alas, they roved about her as though her surroundings were unfamiliar, as though she seemed to search for something which she should never see again.

Meeting Agnes's eager eyes, which through the dusk were watching her, she sighed,

"I have been dull, dear," she said,—she spoke apologetically,—"I was tired with the walk to your house."

"Yes, mother. I saw you snatching a little nap by the fire."

"The air strikes very cold, Agnes."

Agnes wrapped the cloak, the shabby cloak of crape, closer about her mother's thin shoulders.

"The house was warm, mother; we came straight into the cold wind."

"Straight into the cold wind," she repeated; holding her daughter's arm with both hands she looked again into her face, it was the mere outline of a face in the twilight. "You are very happy, aren't you, my dear?" she questioned, suddenly.

"Very happy," said St. Agnes.

"So happy and so prosperous,—I am glad of that. Your father was fastidious, and too poor to be fastidious. What did he say, Agnes?"

Agnes answered that she could not remember what he had said, she could remember nothing. Mrs. Trevor was disappointed at this, but began

to rout about in her own memory for the facts she wanted.

"He was very fond of you, Agnes; you were a pretty baby, and so good—always so good. You were the first. I used to dress you in white nainsook frocks tucked with work, so pretty—we were not poor then; and he would take you out with him, you would toddle, holding to his finger; a child was a novelty in those old days."

The hesitating voice was not the dear voice of yore; but to hear her talk of the past, to hear her speak of her husband, showed that she was changing, had changed and was better. Agnes's heart throbbed with hope and wonder, her eyes grew dim; she was thankful, yet agitated.

"He wanted to have a soldier son;" her voice sank, she walked so slowly, so laboriously, "but I thwarted him—I thwarted him in many ways; I used to think of money, I thought so much of —money."

"Some one must think of money, darling; you thought,—because of us."

There was a silence then for a moment.

"The old days were happy, Agnes."

"Yes, yes, indeed they were."

Her daughter's voice trembled; again Mrs. Trevor looked up into her face.

"You are sure that you are happy, Agnes?"

"Yes, dearest, yes."

"That is right, your father didn't understand, I must tell him—ah, I forgot.—It is very cold, Agnes."

It was, in truth, and they walked so slowly. How heavily she leaned upon her daughter's arm, so very heavily that presently the arm bent beneath the weight, and Agnes staggered.

"Mother," a sharp pang of sudden dread, smothering the new-born hopes—"Mother, aren't you well? Mother, take care, I shall fall, you lean too heavily. There, never mind," and she clasped the reeling figure in her arms. "I can hold you now. Don't be frightened, you are faint. You will be better in a moment." Then she cried a desperate cry to her sisters, who were somewhere out of sight. "Come back, come back. Make haste, mother is ill. I cannot hold her, she has fallen. Help me! Help me!"

CHAPTER III.

"Could we but know
The land that ends our travel,
Where lie those happier hills and meadows low."

FOR several days Mrs. Trevor was very ill, she lay immovable, unconscious. Then, little by little, life crept back into her veins, and any immediate danger was at an end. It was foretold that, if all went well, she would regain her shattered health, and take up the loose threads of her numbed life.

For those long, anxious days and nights, her daughters had hardly left her side. Their watch had been a vigil of acute, dumb misery; she had been unaware of their despair, and had slumbered though her children's hearts were breaking so near to her.

It had been unnecessary to multiply watchers thus, it had done no good,—the same bracing counsel, "it was 'no good' to mourn, to pray, to hope, to fear,"—and yet they did all these things,

—was proffered them, as of old. If they caught the meaning of the many well-worn words of wisdom spoken, (which seemed doubtful,) if they had heard they had not heeded.

Was it reasonable to suppose that Mr. Hacket would stand hour by hour unweariedly by a sick-bed, because his wife's mother lay sick? Could he watch an unconscious face and listen to laborious breathing, as though the world contained no other sight nor sound from pole to pole? He could not do so; in all his prior experiences he had never done so for any invalid; such vigils did "no good" to the sufferer and injured those who watched; it was superfluous labour, strength wasted.

During the second day of the illness, he had called Agnes to him to beg her to consider her own health. He reminded her that she was risking that priceless possession, but she stared at him as though he spoke a language she did not understand. He said that he was ready to defray the expenses of a sick nurse, if, by doing so, he could release her from her labour. She still stared at him, though now she glanced back anxiously towards the room she had quitted. He

did not like her look, she was drawn and pale; he took alarm at her appearance, and suddenly decreed that for her own sake, by his desire, considering her alone, she must go home with him and rest.

Then she, Agnes, his gentle, yielding Agnes, had fiercely turned upon him and cried,

"That she was 'at home,' that she would not leave her home. How could he, could he, could he ask her to leave—now?"

So he, against his judgment and his wishes, had given way to her, she should do as she desired if she was so set upon making herself ill; he sighed as he said this, for he was worried and the world seemed contrary after all. Mrs. Dawson had prophesied that Hillsden—lying, as it did, at his very gates—would prove a thorn in the flesh as time went on; Maria had been right, the thorn was pricking him just at this juncture.

In those long days he had been patient. Now Mrs. Trevor was going on well, now acute anxiety was a thing of the past, now "the king should have his own again," and Mrs. Hacket might enjoy the rest, peace, comfort of her home.

The aspect of the sick-room had changed.

Elsie sat by the window, sewing at arrears of mending and darning; Celia, very still and subdued, crouched by the fire, every now and again glancing across at the quiet face upon the pillow. Both the younger faces bore the impress of their anxiety, though its tension was relaxed, and they could smile and talk again as they settled down into the routine of daily existence.

Then the door opened and Agnes came in. She was equipped for walking, she had come to say good-bye, she was going back to her husband, to her home. Trouble, fellow-suffering, had drawn the three sisters very closely together, they hated this inevitable parting, but they went through it stoically enough, ashamed to be capable of feeling anything but thankfulness.

Poor Precautia clung very tightly to Agnes, her mane of hair was dishevelled, her little face was white and sad, she might have been near down to the Dark Valley herself, she was shadowed by its influence and awed.

"You'll come to-morrow, Agnes?"

"Yes, of course I will. Precautia, put on your things and walk with me, the air will take away your headache."

"I have been out with Arthur, he is waiting downstairs for you; Mortimer has driven over to Dalston for eggs—or something. He's got the cart later, he wants Elsie to go for a little drive."

They knew whom Precautia's "he" meant, Major Wyndham had been the "he" of the whole household for the last few days. Not that the nurses had seen him, but they had felt his presence; he had been Caroline's right hand, he had fetched and carried, he had suggested and executed, he had listened and assisted; no doubt he had been in his element, for he had had an opportunity of being useful, he was completely "cock of the walk." There is much to be done in a sick house, remedies to be fetched, messages to be sent, odds and ends of employment cropping up incessantly. In an impoverished sick-house a considerate friend is a friend in need and indeed.

Once only, during those past days, had Agnes seen Major Wyndham. One evening when she had followed the doctor downstairs to hear his bulletin, and had heard no good thing, she had turned aside, to learn upon her knees, in the darkness of the school-room, how best to carry

back her evil news. Then she had met Arthur face to face upon the threshold of her hiding-place.

There had been that enervating compassion in his voice such as oversets the bravest self-control. His presence, when he spoke like that, was no restraint, no help. Agnes had cowered down in the old arm-chair and wrung her hands and wept. Then his voice had changed; it had nerved, inspirited, quieted her.

Those tears had done her good; the luxury of breaking down had not been an expensive one —no, the intolerable pain was endurable once more. She had dried her eyes in the soft twilight; he had said beautiful things of her goodness and her strength; she went back to the room, her strength as the strength of ten, again St. Agnes.

Whom could Celia's pronoun mean but Major Wyndham?

"Won't you come, Precautia?"

"No, presently I'll go; I like him all alone, not when he talks to you and Elsie, then he doesn't hear what I say. Good-bye, Aggie."

Mrs. Trevor smiled her good-bye; reclosing

her eyes before the door closed after her eldest born, she slept away the weary hours peacefully.

The napless carpet on the stairs did not muffle footsteps; the rickety bannisters shook beneath Agnes's hand as she descended to the hall where Major Wyndham loitered awaiting her.

"You look tired," he said. She did indeed, overweighted by her sables and her sealskin, by a heavy velvet hat shading her face, which looked pathetically pale and childish. "I wish you'd driven home."

"I'd rather walk; the air does me good. Mortimer would have fetched me in the brougham, but I said I would rather walk."

"I thought you always said 'yes' to everything."

"Did you think me so weak, Major Wyndham?"

The cold air was invigorating, she held up her face to meet it.

"If you call it weakness. In the old days you did what you were asked to do invariably."

"Did I? Well, that was weakness, for sometimes I used to hide from you, because you liked me to carry the bait when you were fishing, and I did so hate it."

"The company, the walk, or the worms?"

"Only the worms."

"The company too, I'm afraid; I was rough."

"Not rougher than the boys. Poor boys, I am glad we did not send for them; I wanted them, but the journeys were too long.—You have seen Fred?"

"Yes, I rode over to the bank yesterday, and I wrote a line or two each day to Nat; my father has seen Harry and written to him."

"People have been so kind."

"They have been so anxious. Caroline has been distracted with callers; a bulletin was no good, the villagers pretended not to notice it, they would see Caroline, and they would talk to her. What a luxury a tongue is to its owner, it is a blessing which we all enjoy without feeling grateful—a matter-of-course possession."

"But sometimes you are silent, you let Celia do the talking."

"And very often you are silent, Mrs. Hacket."

"Am I? But I talk to you so much, I have often noticed it; I think it is so easy to talk to you. Some people are good talkers, and then they are always thinking of the next good thing

they'll say, and they do not hear my small remark, so I am snubbed and silent. But you listen and understand; so my tongue is a pleasure to me, as you say."

They were walking along the winding drive of her home, and at her feet a withered bunch of twigs lay on the gravel. She pointed to it.

"That was here last time I passed," she said; "it seems so long ago, and nothing has altered—everything out of doors is the same, and I am the same."

"Not quite the same, you have a scar or two; you don't go through such anxiety and come out scathless."

"When I looked in the glass I thought I should find I had changed; but there was no change—no white hair, no lines. My hat and my furs lay just as I had left them."

"That is an old complaint of ours, Mrs. Hacket; we think the whole world should groan because times are rough with us. I felt all that the other day. When I got back to my quarters, after that frontier job, there was my old tobacco-jar, a nigger's head it was, and grinning at me with the very same leer as I had left behind me."

Arthur paused; he had turned very grave over his nigger reminiscences.

"What did you do?" She led him softly on to talk of the subject which he was wont to shun.

"First, I wondered; then I made a fool of myself. I was hacked about, you know, and shaky, and I couldn't think how he'd had the heart to go on grinning all the time. I believe I cried like a child. The doctor banished my poor nigger—for the fever was on me at the time."

She looked up, with those dove-like eyes of hers, at the sabre-cut across his face.

"Was it so bad?" she asked, gently.

"Fighting is grim work."

"And yet you saw the best side of it—the winning side."

"There's no best side to war; there's the winning and the losing, but no superlative of good; little good of even a comparative degree."

"Oh, but to take your life in your hand, and to fight for your Queen and your country, it is splendid!"

"It has to be done; it sounds well as you put it; women, even women like you, see nothing but glory in battle. You have so little experience and

so much enthusiasm; there's a gloss of romance, too, over the thing. Don't you know that somebody says there's more honest fame in staunching tears than shedding seas of gore."

"I wish you wouldn't run yourself down. I hate to hear you do it."

At her own door Major Wyndham left Agnes; he had promised to see Elsie early next day, and bring up the latest news of the invalid; he knew Agnes was too busy to leave home in the morning.

"I am not too busy," she answered, with a shade of discontent, "but I can't come until after lunch. Good-bye."

Mr. Hacket was glad to find his wife in far better spirits and looks than he had anticipated. When he talked lightly of Mrs. Trevor's illness, when he was congratulatory over her recovery, Agnes followed his cue and was cheerful too. She contributed her share to the conversation. She did not "say him nay" when he remarked how fortunate it was that he had not postponed the dinner-party, that he had never been led into taking an exaggerated view of Mrs. Trevor's danger. She looked through the lists of guests; she read the notes which accepted Mr. and Mrs.

Hacket's kind invitation; she betrayed her ignorance over the *menu*, but what could she know on the subject? Had she not been transplanted from a school-rooom where strawberry jam was a luxury, treacle and porridge ordinary fare? Fortunate woman; hers was, indeed, promotion!

A tall lamp, with an ample shade, threw its soft light upon her as she sat, opposite the fire, half-buried in her great arm-chair. The light fell on her heavy velvet dress, upon her fair, white neck and arms, upon the rubies round her throat, upon her innocent young face, upon her thin hands, which, ablaze with jewels, played with the heap of notes upon her lap.

A critical eye might not have relished quite so much adornment on such youth, but Mr. Hacket admired "dressiness," as he called the fine feathers which he bought for his bird; as the feathers were fine it was impossible to have too many of them; he spent his money, and he liked to see what it had achieved, he liked to see Agnes dressed to death.

In her girlhood a new frock had been an epoch-making event. She had dreamed by night and planned by day its fashion and its kind; she

had coveted it, as girls do, and have done, and will continue to do, even when frocks are not speculative traps to catch permanent sunbeams. At first Mrs. Hacket's smartness had been but little pleasure to her, it had come with the new life, it was part of the new home; yet of late she had grown to admire her velvets and her lace, her feathers and her jewels; she had little to occupy her mind, she could think of her clothes, and, as her husband so often told her "fine feathers make fine birds," it was only human to like to look nice.

That night she had no pride in her decorations, no thought of velvet or lace, no interest in the pale face atop of all this smartness; she had brought the husk of herself to the Oaks, all her thoughts lingered in the sick-room at Hillsden. She talked, and she smiled, and she listened, for a year she had stifled her own inclinations, merged her own identity in that of Mr. Hacket, lived a forced, not a natural life; but as long as Agnes was at home, doing her husband's behests and listening to his discourse, she did her duty; she satisfied him and she satisfied herself.

Mr. Hacket had a great deal to say about

Elsie, and was vexed with his wife for fancying that it was possible she would absent herself from the dinner for any save the gravest consideration. He said that desirable husbands did not grow like acorns and fall upon the ground at women's feet; he said that improvidence at any time was a sin; he said that Major Wyndham had shown his hand, that the *raison d'être* for all his sympathetic kindness must be a fond and foolish weakness for Elsie.

Agnes agreed with all this, but she repeated, "that unless her mother was a good deal better by the date of the dinner it was unlikely that Elsie would leave her."

"You judge her by yourself, my dear; you took your time to take me, but Elsie's not your sort, she's go-ahead and knows her mind. And Wyndham's the kind of fellow for a girl to fancy with his scars, and his small talk, and his medals, and his handsome face. Any girl would jump at him, and it's all very fine for Miss Elsie to be coy, but it's dangerous play; there's many a fine fish has slipped through lovely fingers before now. He that will not when he may—you know the saying, and it's the truth. You kept me dangling

—but, there, Agnes, you are one in a million, and I was no love-sick lad to be impatient and uncertain."

Mr. Hacket leaned back in his chair, his large white hands were folded on his ample waistcoat.

"Shall I sing, Mortimer? Would you like some music?"

"No, my dear, you are tired. Stay where you are, I want nothing but to sit and look at you. I missed you sadly."

"Did you? But I don't think you like my songs?"

"Well, no, it's sharp of you to find that out. I like a tune myself—and execution; you sing the heart out of me with those ballads on two notes. I like the trills and shakes, the Italian style. Poor Jane *could* sing, but you have never learnt; it's nice and soft your voice, but nothing showy. I drop off to sleep when you sing, Agnes."

She was a little wounded at these disclosures, but if her husband slept there were some ears which listened wide-awake as she made melody. Her mother had taught her what she knew of

music—ah, she must talk again, not think; tears were so near her eyes, her cheerfulness but superficial.

She had a faint feeling of admiration for her own self-command, a faint feeling of wonder at her own histrionic talent; to please her husband how easy it was to act, how easy to seem other than she was—but she had had some practice at this art. She had training here, execution and experience.

CHAPTER IV.

"Time filches from the flowers,
Time steals the sweetness from the song,
Love only scorns the tyrant's power,
And with the growing years grows strong."

PEOPLE soon adapted themselves to the fact of Mrs. Trevor's illness, (as they would have adapted themselves to a far more revolutionary occurrence). She had become a permanent invalid; it was sad, but there were many other invalids, permanent and otherwise, amongst their acquaintances. Poor Mrs. Trevor had been more or less of a nonentity since her widowhood; whether she lay prone in her bed, or whether she sat amongst people, silent, dreamy and depressing, in her own or her neighbours' drawing-room, made small difference to anyone save to her nearest and dearest. But everyone commiserated Mrs. Trevor's girls. To Elsie the sick nursing was additional work, health was a perpetual anxiety, doctors and luxuries were imperative

necessities, expenditure was on the increase, while income was stationary; they were full of pity for Elsie.

Mrs. Trevor made less improvement, gained less ground than it had been anticipated she would do, but she looked at peace and she suffered no pain; over these two circumstances her daughters comforted themselves, meeting this new trouble with courage.

It was difficult to despair, it was impossible to grow despondent when kind friends were ever at hand to cheer, encourage, sympathise, and help. Sympathy tempers sorrow, alleviates anxiety. Agnes and the younger girls did not lose heart, nor suffer from any visible depression of spirits. No doubt they showed their best side to the world, they hid the daily struggles from observant eyes, they talked with open unreserve to no one. But Celia had learnt no stratagem of love or pride, she babbled of all the Trevor secrets—such, at least, as Precautia knew—and the hearers made no comment, nor bade her be silent, but listened and learned.

No doubt Major Wyndham was an energetic man, and he had no scope for the exercise of

that attribute at the rectory, for he continued to hold the post of odd man, to whom no service came amiss, at Hillsden. All the village knew it, and all the village gossiped and surmised, spreading the rumours far and wide.

Inquisitive people asked the rector boldly, "Whether it was true—(they had been told on what seemed good authority, or would not have mentioned the subject for the world)—that his son's engagement to Miss Trevor was announced?"

Neither the rector's broad and conscious smile nor his answer, "That if it was so, he had been kept in the dark, for he had been told nothing," were likely to stamp out the report. The Blankshire mothers wondered why the Trevor girls, who were dressed in rags and who went *nowhere,* and saw *no one,* married in their teens? Of course, Agnes had made a mercenary marriage, such as less cautious maidens would have declined. Yet the younger sister was about to do extremely well for herself from every point of view. There was a vein of luck which ran in some families that was equivalent in value to much money.

The "luck" at Hillsden did not seem over-

whelming to the dwellers there; but then, if we go to the seat of that "luck" of which we hear a flaming report, it never does seem anything so tremendous. The owner is not contented with his share of it—you may depend on it.

Max St. Maur was going "home" for Christmas, or rather the fag-end of Christmas-tide; after all, he had spent the twenty-fifth and its octave with his newly-found relations, but if the Trevors really wanted him, he was only too glad to go to them. Max was the kind of person who travels snail fashion with his home upon his back, his "mind to him a kingdom was;" he naturally took his kingdom with him, and was apt to forget that there were more kingdoms and more kings abroad, with systems of government diametrically opposed to the one in his possession. But his lively young cousin, Miss St. Maur, had cracked his enveloping shell, and intruded upon his kingdom, she had opened his eyes somewhat, she had educated some undeveloped faculties, she had awakened his interest in her own great theme, the theme of love; there was more in this subject than he had fancied, it was worth studying, experimental research even might be undertaken with advantage.

Max soon found that there was a living nucleus of his fair cousin's theme. A youth with a waist, with a wondrous tailor, with an amazing swagger and an amazing indifference to books whom she loved and at whom Max looked with curiosity. The light fell through the cracks of his rent shell, he asked himself of what avail was a "first-class" if he had not a first-class tailor. He sighed heavily, then he smiled faintly. Elsie had never set eyes on a "good" coat in her life, she liked him as he was, round-backed, bad-booted as he was. He wrote constantly to enquire for Mrs. Trevor, his letters never lay unanswered.

It was bitterly cold, the ground rigid, black with frost, the air sharp, stinging, on the afternoon when Max travelled down to Dorfold. Huddled down beneath his rug, with an Inverness coat shrouding him to the ears and a cap drawn down to his eyes, he dozed away the time in the corner of the dusky carriage. His best friend would not have recognised him, and two Blankshire girls got into his compartment at Dorfold Road Junction and continued their conversation, with that extraordinary frankness with which people discuss their own and their neighbour's business in a public

conveyance. Max knew the girls, but they did not know him; he was glad of it, he kept his eyes shut and listened to their incessant chatter, which interested him because they talked as Miss St. Maur talked, using her expressions and discussing her immortal theme.

But presently their candour shocked him, for they were speaking of Hillsden and the Trevors, and speaking no more charitably upon this subject than upon the less sacred topics with which they had finished; their slang was odious in his ears. What were these women saying?

They said "that Agnes Hacket no longer shut herself up as though she was ashamed of that bogie, that bounder she had married, (as she had every reason to be ashamed). How could she have done it? She could not have been so simple as they had once thought her. There was a dinner at the Oaks that night, the Stubbs and the Boughton-Hills were going. They had not been asked and were glad of it, dinners were dull as ink. Elsie Trevor was stupid enough, but good-looking, and so much improved. Had Nora heard?" Nora had not heard, nor had Max. He opened those wishwashy eyes of his, for it seemed

that Arthur Wyndham had fallen in love with Elsie, "that he followed her about like a dog, that he was always at Hillsden, that he helped to nurse poor Mrs. Trevor, that he was infatuated about the whole family, and that Elsie ought to be proud of herself."

"He is *such a darling!*" the girl, with the news, continued. "You can see the scar on his face, and he had his arm in a sling at first, it was riddled and riddled with shot, they say. He's awfully good-looking, and he's coming to our ball on the 11th, but of course he's no good now, he's *worse* than married."

The girls' converse floated on to foreign subjects, and Max heard no more; he pondered. Elsie's letters had been dwindling in quantity and quality just lately, once and again he had been disappointed at receiving one of Precautia's telegraphic despatches instead of a long confidential rigmarole from his special correspondent. The old letters had been written small and close, lots of them, no stint of words; the last he had received was short enough, he had it in his pocket:

"DEAR MAX, (it said,)

"Thanks for your letter. Dr. Walters thinks that she's going on fairly well; I told her you are coming. The boys go back upon the 2nd, so you will just miss them. The Hackets have a dinner-party the night you come; Mortimer has asked you, and I've accepted for you. I'm glad you like your new relations, they seem as nice as they are new. I hope you will have a happy Christmas.

"Your affectionate

"ELSPETH MARY TREVOR."

The Elspeth Mary meant what Maxwell in old time would have called "a storm in a tea-cup," "fat in the fire." Now for Major Wyndham's benefit all the gales and the splutters must be kept, who could be mad enough to grudge him his distinction?

All day Max had been feeling blithe as a boy on his way home for the holidays, he had the vague, pleasurable anticipations of boyhood, but when he alighted on Dorfold platform, and heard no eager voice, no rustle of petticoats, when he realised that no one was there to welcome him,

that Elsie had, for the first time in her life, failed to meet him, the flutter of excitement in his breast collapsed, its place was usurped by a decided flatness.

During his walk Hillsden-wards, he peered closely at every passing figure, hardly able to credit that Elsie had forgotten him.

"A child ain't like a child till you miss un,"

as the song says, and Max had missed his welcome.

But in the hall at Hillsden Elsie met him, holding up her face for his kiss, and ushering him off to the school-room, where the urn hissed and the fire blazed for his comfort, where she stripped off his great-coat and ordered him into the arm-chair in a very familiar manner.

It was only when she made his tea and talked to him that he saw that she was changed, or, looking for a change, because of the things which he had heard, he was ready to fancy that she was older, less childish, more reserved, and far, far prettier than any woman whom he had ever seen.

She did not apologise for not meeting him,

and she said that Celia had gone down to tea at the rectory, but would be in presently, and would entertain Max while she, Elsie, went back to the sick-room.

"Have I grown to want *entertaining?*" he asked, quickly; "don't, Elsie, don't treat me as though I was——" he had almost said Major Wyndham, but he substituted "a stranger."

"You have been away a long while," she returned, with her eyes on the fire, "you seem quite like a stranger."

Then they fell to talking of Nat, and of the boys, and of Mrs. Trevor's illness, and Elsie told him that Agnes' dinner-party was a very big and smart one.

"Are you going?"

"Yes," said Elsie, with a sparkle in her eyes; there could be no doubt that she was pleased at the prospect. "The rector and Arthur are going to call for us at twenty minutes to eight."

There was a long pause.

"I hate dinner-parties," Max said, somewhat ungraciously, "and I thought old Hacket never gave anything, but of course I must go. How is Agnes?"

Again Elsie's face brightened: she answered, with a smile,

"She is quite different, Max; so cheery and so well. You used to think all sorts of things and pity her, but she is very happy—she is, indeed."

"Old Hacket makes her quite happy, does he?"

Max pushed his hand through his hair, destroying the last vestige of parting or order in his ruddy locks, and dropped his eyeglass as he spoke.

"Oh, yes;" she spoke earnestly, as though she wished to impress the truth upon herself as well as upon her listener.

"Agnes is so sweet-tempered and sensible."

Max's voice was not easy to understand, and the light died out of Elsie's eyes as she answered, "Yes," in rather a constrained voice, remembering that her best friend could not call Elspeth either "sweet" or "sensible," and recollecting these were qualities prized by the speaker.

"What odd things women are," Max said, irrelevantly, staring very hard at Elsie, and speaking as though his remark was an original one,

and the result of much experience and more reflection.

"By women I suppose you mean your cousin," said Elsie, coldly, "because she is about the only woman you do know.—I did not understand she was odd, I understood she was perfectly charming."

"So she is. I wasn't thinking of Poppy, but of Agnes."

"Odd, you call Agnes odd? That's the last adjective in the world I should apply to an—an angel."

She was hot, angry, ready to fight, and Max had not been in the house an hour. What a dreadful effect he had upon her.

"By odd I didn't mean eccentric, but incomprehensible." The young man was not inclined to pick up the gauntlet; he smiled—his smile was the only comely thing about this ungainly scholar, it was very genial and kind—Elsie returned it and rose to her feet. "Are you going? Don't go for a minute—it's so nice to see you again. There is no place like home—even home," his light eyes were expressive now, "with the changes of this eighteen months to alter it."

"But I must go; Caroline is busy, Max."

She would not have left him so soon, she would have followed him like his shadow from room to room, only a year ago. There were changes at Hillsden beyond those made by death, or its precursor; he had been away too long, far too long; he liked the old times best——

His train of thought was interrupted by Celia's entrance. There was nothing new about her, thank heaven, except perhaps an increased self-importance of manner and general bearing, with an increased length of leg and mane of hair. Her demonstrative affection was pleasant to meet --she was Precautia in her most genial mood. Max had never made so much of her before, but she took his kindness as a matter of course; she was well used to indulgent treatment. Gumbo was at her heels; he took no heed of Max's friendly overtures, he merely waved his tail, and, going to the rug, he lay down there with shut eyes. Precautia apologised for his lack of politeness.

"He's rather forgotten you; he's getting old, he likes his dinner, and he likes me, but nothing else.—He is pretty fond of Arthur, though."

Max found that the conversation always embraced Major Wyndham, no matter in what direction it was piloted.

Arthur and Celia had been to the Oaks that afternoon. Agnes had arranged her flowers, they were exquisite; Arthur had designed, she had executed, the table decorations.

The house had been full of interest, waiters and fruit the principal items. Agnes was to wear a violet velvet dress, and Mortimer had had the amethysts reset for her; and Celia wished, more than she had wished anything in her life, that she was grown-up and fit for dinner-parties. Elsie must be dressing by this time; Mortimer had given her a frock, the loveliest thing ever hung in a Hillsden wardrobe, and Arthur had sent a ton of lilies-of-the-valley.

Max listened to all this artless prattle with more attention than he had been wont to bestow upon Precautia's confidences. But the child, affectionate though she was, could not be induced to remain with Max; he felt like the idle boy who solicited bee and beast to share his idleness, and was rebuked by the moral creatures. Celia had lots to do; she must see her mother, she must

help Elsie; she bustled away, fussy, important, in her element. Then Max went up to his room to dress.

His portmanteau had not been unpacked, nor his rugs unrolled. He caught a whiff of flowers as he entered the room, and in a vase upon his dressing-table was a button-hole of lilies; it struck him that Elsie was unnecessarily generous with Major Wyndham's gift to her. His toilet did not take him long; he knew no anxieties of collar, tie, or shirt, he wore his clothes to cover, not to enhance his charms, so he was soon down in the school-room again, smoking a pipe to fill the time till Elsie should appear.

Celia rushed in, presently, hunting for pins.

"Elsie says you'll lend her your pin-cushion, Max. That's it, thank you. She put some flowers for you in your room, and she says you mustn't forget that tuft at the back of your head. Oh, Max, it's sticking up like a cockatoo, it really is. Wait a moment, I'll get your brush."

This sort of treatment was humiliating, though familiar. Max submitted his head to Celia's tender mercies; the tuft tussled fiercely for independence, but was at last subdued. Then the

young valet tweaked down his coat at the back and scolded because the result was not what she had expected.

"You don't look so very nice," she murmured, candidly; "your coat does wrinkle, and your tie's like tape. There's a hill in your shirt, flatten it down. That is better."

She stepped a pace back, looking at him critically, without speaking. This sort of inspection is galling.

"What's wrong, Precautia?"—the voice of the young man was anxious.

"Oh, nothing, nothing—nothing at all," hastily, and averting her eyes. "I had forgotten you, that is all. I thought you were more like a soldier, that is all."

The everlasting allusions to one profession vexed his ear; the apologetic, "That is all," was mortifying.

"So I must be drilled, pared, smartened, before I'm fit to be seen—eh, Precautia?"

Something in his voice appealed to her feelings.

"I don't want you changed," she said, affectionately. "No one who is clever wants to be

smart; only, you see, I'd forgotten how you looked. —Arthur wears a smoking-coat in the evening; you'll smell horrid at dinner in that."

There was something in this rebuke. Max laid his pipe down, and just then Caroline brought a message to the school-room.

"Mrs. Trevor was awake and would like to see Mr. Max, if he would please step up to her room."

So Max "stepped" up and found Elsie waiting for him by the sick-bed. Had Elsie ever looked like that before, or had he been the blindest bat which ever searched for moths on a summer night? She was bending over the pillow with tender eyes which, quitting her mother's face, travelled up to greet him; she was beautiful, he did make allowance for the beautifying powers of a new frock, he was startled at her fairness. Her dress was white, but the whiteness of the silk was not whiter than her arms and dimpled neck. Her face was pale, but her curved lips were red and dewy, smiling too. A wreath of lilies, their delicate bells outlined against the thick waves and curls of her dusky hair, bound her head; more lilies were fastened in a cluster on her dress.

She was perfectly unconscious of herself, she called Max to her side.

"Here he is, mother." How gently she could speak. "Here he is at last, just come in time to take me to Agnes' dinner-party. We are all getting very old, Max, aren't we?"

Mrs. Trevor smiled and held out her hand, she moved it slowly. Max stooped and laid his lips to it fondly, he had nothing to say but some inarticulate murmur. Elsie had grown accustomed to her mother's illness, but it was new to him, he could not find his tongue for the first moment. Elsie saw how it was and talked on cheerfully, but when they had left the sick-room she began cross-questioning her companion with a tremulous voice.

"He had been shocked, she knew it by his face. Had he found her mother worse than his anticipation?"

All Max said was comforting, she was comforted. Max was genuine, she could believe him, rely on him. She shook off her depression, but she was awed by the importance of the occasion—a first dinner-party is a solemn undertaking.

"That is my cloak, Max, on the landing, that sandy fur rabbit thing by the clock. Put it on carefully,—not the arms, thank you; it would squash my flowers. Your hair is lovely, I never saw it so flat, but," she scanned him from head to foot, "you have forgotten the lilies, and I sent Precautia to remind you,"—her lips straightened, —"it was horrid of you to forget them."

Max was wrapping her carefully in her old cloak, which she wore with so regal an air that an uninitiated male intelligence would have taken the rabbit-skin for ermine and the merino for royal apparel.

"I did not forget," he said firmly.

She tapped her foot on the ground, fidgetted her cloak out of his hold.

"Then you wouldn't wear them?"

He was by way of being a frank young man, but he swerved from the direct truth.

"I never wear button-holes,"—magnificently. Such a generality sounded well, giving the speaker assurance; he could face the storm which would buffet him, but there was nothing of the kind. She turned away and went downstairs in silence on ahead of him. The carriage had

come, and Celia was in the hall. Elsie swallowed the lump which had stolen into her throat, and picked up her rustling train; she would not make a button-hole again, never, never, never,—that was all.

CHAPTER V.

"Oh, thou child of many prayers,
Life hath quicksands,—life hath snares."

DAUNTLESSLY hospitable are those country people, who, in a small establishment, perpetrate a large dinner-party. Fate frowns upon the frivolous entertainers, for it happens that the carrier's cart, containing fish and fruit, breaks down upon the road; the carrier may arrive, he does arrive,—but he arrives late, not before the hostess has been to the gate a score of times to look for him, and has relinquished hope. For it happens that the coachman (who is to assist in the dining-room, and waits *so well*) yields to his old weakness and takes that fatal mug of cider. For it happens that the hired cook, from the county town, falls out with the plain cook on the

premises, and the voice of wrangling is heard through the house. For it happens that the fish-kettle starts leaking, and the parlour-maid develops one of those peculiarly sick-headaches to which she is a martyr. For it happens that the host's temper will not stand the strain upon it and gives way. For it happens that the children run wild during the demoralisation of the servants. For it happens that the hostess has to preserve a genial liveliness, a light-hearted, inexhaustible stock of small talk, adaptable to twenty-two several personalities, throughout the evening,—the long evening, for it is certain that the Dashes will arrive a quarter of an hour too soon and the Blanks ten minutes too late.

None of these trials had assailed Agnes, on Mr. Hacket's shoulders all responsibilities rested, she was an ignoramus with no judgment for sauces, to whom the *menu* of her dinner was Greek. Her post was a sinecure, but she was allowed her own way with the flowers, and a very good way it had been, for the dinner-table was gorgeous with scarlet poinsettias and fragrant with "the dewy, dark-eyed violet."

A most unusual bustle stirred the quiet house.

Agnes came down to the brilliantly lighted drawing-room, her velvet skirts trailing heavily behind her, jewels on her neck, at her ears, in her hair, and awaited her guests with a heart that beat quickly and pulses that throbbed; her eyes shone. Outwardly she was very quiet and composed, within she was stirred, excited; she was a strange Agnes moving in a dream.

Soon carriage wheels rolled up the drive, a yet livelier stir rustled through the house, bells rang, hoofs trampled, doors opened, a gratifying roar of incessant conversation arose round Mrs. Hacket.

Still in a dream she, too, was talking, all the necessary chit-chat fell glibly from her inexperienced lips; it was easy enough to talk lightly when she was taken out by herself by the first serious dissipation of her married life; the realities of life floated somewhere in the clouds, the future was of no account, the past dim.

A country dinner-party was a small excitement, and yet she felt thus: how did those women who, like Arthur's sister, Lady Lely, lived in a whirling course of constant pleasure-seeking,

manage to remember anything serious, real, true? How feather-brained she was, after all!

Everyone had come, they had filed off to the dining-room and were seated round the poinsettias and the violets, around the unsubstantial, ornamental part of Hacket hospitality. They were a goodly company, and had much to say.

There was the woman revered for her sharp tongue and acute observation; there was the woman despised, and yet somewhat of a favourite, with no tongue at all. There was the man whose sole interest was his dinner; there the critical wine-bibber, who drank thoughtfully, and was observed by his fellows, for they wished to read his decision and follow his cue. There was the gruff, loud-voiced country gentleman, who called a spade a spade, and often called it so; there his sad-eyed wife, who shivered at his conversation,—their wedding had been arranged where such functions are not a speciality. There the clergyman's wife, who liked the "best families," and was very grand with a "second-best-family" person who had taken her in.

And there was the rector, looking across the

table, with a proprietary air, upon Elsie who sat between his son and Max St. Maur.

"That is the most beautiful face in the county," said his neighbour, who knew all about such things, for she had been, half a century back, a beauty herself.

"It is," said the rector, "and she is a charming girl, a dear girl, a good girl."

"Your son is a fortunate man, Mr. Wyndham."

"I hope he may be a fortunate man,—some day, Mrs. Vavasour."

Elsie became aware that she was an object of interest to her neighbours, and yet her old, old friend upon her left, with his hair awry and an eyeglass glued in his left eye, did not glance her way, but was talking with a garrulous, giggling lady of uncertain age. Elsie overheard the offensive words "London," and "cousin," falling from his lips, so she inclined her head to her right-hand neighbour.

She had not much to say to Arthur Wyndham, she saw him constantly, he knew everything which she had to tell; but his tongue was "on duty," as tongues in company should be. It

seemed to grow a little weary of wagging, for it certainly wagged at random; his eyes were grave and pre-occupied, but Elsie did not notice this, she kept one ear strained to catch the drift of the chatter around her—in the exasperating way of frail humanity—so he had not her full attention.

"One might imagine Agnes had been wife to an ambassador for fifty years; look at her, Arthur. What excellent manners."

"From an excellent heart. Good manners graft on a good heart."

"So some one said, but I don't know. A desire to please is my motive, when I have nice manners. How Agnes has changed!"

"You have said that so often lately," he answered. "How has she changed? Was she so very different a—a year ago?"

"She has altered;" the troubled, questioning look which he knew so well came in furrows on Elsie's forehead. "People always alter, don't they?"

"Not perceptibly in so short a time. How do you mean she has altered—in what way?"

"Twice she has changed. At first she was grave, old, listless, dull; now she is—different."

"But how—different?"

"Why will you always discuss Agnes? Don't you understand? She used to be un-happy, now she is—happy: there is no change—at least, I think—I'm sure—there is no change but that."

The woman upon Major Wyndham's right hand here addressed him, and Elsie was left with nothing to do but to enjoy her dinner.

The mysterious atom on her plate was not nice, but she ate it. The roar of voices made her head ache. How hot and red some of the people were getting—laughing hyenas, all of them! Agnes was enjoying herself; how well she looked! Could that gracious, assured girl be the same Agnes who had wept and wailed in the tool-house on a chilly winter day only a year ago, who had wrung her hands and clung to her sister, whispering she "must do what she could"?

Could good come out of evil? Was laughter born of tears? Had riches such a wide beneficence that their possession gilded sorrow, and made life glitter as though it was pure gold through and through?

What a gust of conversation that dreadful

woman beyond Max let fall about his ears. She was—horrible woman!—she was clever and cultured, she was discussing architecture, on which subject Elsie's mind was a blank; it was dreary work, it was irritating work listening to that pattering dialogue upon her left: she brought her shoulder an inch more forward, turning away her head.

Then the voice—a voice with no musical note, no tender inflection about it—but the voice which, for no reason on earth but that of unreasoning fate, was strong to please or to pain, to cheer or to dishearten, to irritate or to soothe the pretty ear to which it now addressed itself, reached Elsie direct.

"What's that inscription in the church, Elsie, by your pew? I've forgotten how it goes."

"Mr. Wyndham will tell you;" shortly.

"You don't know?"

"Have you forgotten that I know nothing?" still more sharply.

"I had forgotten, one does forget, how ill-tempered you can be without any provocation." Max had never taken Elsie seriously before; he took this with extreme severity. She was con-

founded; he saw it, and went on, less pompously, "Why do you snap my head off? What have I done? We were the best friends possible an hour ago."

"You have not spoken to me *all* this time."

"But you were talking to Wyndham. Surely you don't expect me to sit silent, waiting my opportunity of catching your attention the second it is disengaged?"

"I expect nothing of you," said this unreasonable lady, with an unamiable smile. "You belong to Miss Who-is-her-name; talk to her."

So the nose was sliced off, and some one, we hope, was pleased. Max resumed his conversation with the agreeable talker, not at all discomposed by the strained relationship upon his other hand. Arthur again turned to Elsie; he was very pleasant, they laughed a great deal, but the girl thought a dinner-party disappointing, it lasted such an interminable time: her face was flushed and her feet were cold, there are handicaps on many a treat.

At last, at last the ladies were off. Elsie, at the end of the floating stream of female charms, found herself close to Agnes. Now that Elsie

was beside that well-known face, she saw that its animation, and the soft sweet smiles were not a form of "company manners," pleasure and exhilaration were behind them, nothing artificial spoiled their significance. If Elsie had been disappointed, Agnes had liked the entertainment; she had liked the clack, the clatter, the jokes of the laughing hyenas. She lifted her shining eyes to Elsie's, and said, in an undertone, hurriedly,

"You enjoyed yourself, Elsie? It went off well."

"Talked a great deal, ate more: no, I don't like such a long, long meal."

Elsie found the following half-hour less noisy and more pleasant; people were very kind to her, her beauty was winning, and she was a successful young person. One or two bold spirits, thirsty for information, inquired in whispers of Mrs. Hacket "whether Major Wyndham was——"? But Mrs. Hacket was dense; she said, "He was a great friend of the family; the Wyndhams had always been special friends of the Trevors. Her mother—oh, yes, her mother was much better; the doctor was most hopeful." The speaker had strayed from the original topic; it was difficult to begin it again.

The dinner-party was an undoubted success; no one fell frankly asleep, no one was objectionably hilarious. There were several warblers and one pianist amongst the guests. Under the cover of continual music, continual chatter raged in a way more gratifying in the ears of the host and hostess than in the ears of the musicians.

The doors of the conservatory stood open. In the inmost recesses of that fragrant retreat Mr. Hacket had placed two wicker-work garden-chairs. With his own hands he had arranged a slim silver lamp, with an elaborate pink shade, an occasional table, amongst the palms. He had spent a long time in adjusting and readjusting their relative positions.

Knowing of that secluded nook, knowing how gravely and contemplatively it had been designed, no wonder that Agnes grew absent and constrained for a moment as she saw Arthur and Elsie walk across the room to the open door leading thither.

They were both solemn. Elsie, as she stepped over the threshold, looked back over her shoulder, and there was a shadow in her eyes. She looked at Max;—was Elsie mad? Major Wyndham cast

no glance behind him, but followed close to his loitering comrade, as she sauntered down the scented avenue of flowers; they walked on into the shadows out of sight.

Elsie must be mad, for when Major Wyndham pointed out the haven of delight amongst the palms yonder, she looked discontentedly about her.

"Nobody is here," she said, as though an *omnium gatherum* was expected on two feet square of tesselated pavement.

"So I am nobody?"

"I mean, nobody but you."

"Thanks; the explanation makes it almost flattering. You see, Elsie, that there are exactly *two* chairs."

"Yes, and they are only those horrid garden-seats, dreadfully uncomfortable; they don't slant down at the back like the carpet chairs."

Again she looked wistfully over her shoulder, but he ignored the significance of her attitude, and drew one of the offensive chairs an inch or two forward.

"Do you want to stay here, Arthur?"

"Yes, I do."

Arthur had not, as a rule, the masculine difficulty for monopolising "wantings," he was more apt to find out his neighbour's inclination and base his desires upon that; but now he was selfish, Elsie told herself, as she sat down on the edge of her chair, obviously on the alert to seize the first opportunity to be off.

"As it is a *party*, Arthur, I am afraid they will think it rather rude of us to come away by ourselves like this."

"I don't think they will be hard on us."

"But we can't even see what they are doing."

"I can see you, Elsie."

"Then you must have the eyes of a cat. I can't see anything, it is so dark; do take off that dismal shade."

He did as he was bidden, balancing the discarded shade with great care, with elaborate care upon the adjacent palm. As he did this he laughed; Elsie heard no jarring note, no hyena-tendency in that laugh, but Arthur, himself, did not like its tone, and cut it short with a sigh.

"What are you laughing at?"

"At you. No, no, not at you, but at my thoughts about you."

"Hush — one moment — don't talk — listen. Agnes is going to sing, that's the prelude, it's such a pretty song. Hark, it sounds well out here."

But Major Wyndham was not to be silenced, he went on talking through the music as though Elsie's wishes were of no consequence; his voice half-drowned the soft notes of the song which came down to them through the flowers.

"Elsie," he said, "I have brought you away from the people because I want to speak to you alone. I have something very serious to say to you."

He had caught her full and startled attention now; she turned towards him, her great, anxious eyes raised to his face. The lilies were fading in her hair, and drooping on her dress, but they were fragrant still.

Poor Elsie! there was a cloudy background to this first glimpse into the pomps and vanities. Her mind flew home, to the prostrate figure who lay there, and by whom Celia watched and yawned; to a lonely soldier boy; to—yes, to the butcher's bill which had come in and grown, and come in and grown again, time after time, till the butcher waxed impatient for his dues. Poor

butcher, but still poorer the consumer of his wares.

"What is it?"

He was, in truth, in extreme seriousness, so white, so agitated, a strange Arthur who frightened her; she shrank a foot from his vicinity.

"It is this, Elsie. What do you think of me as a husband?"

"A h-u-s-band!" She breathed again. A weighty matter this to him, but little to her, less than nothing in comparison to what she had feared to hear. "A husband!" cheerily and sympathetically. "Whose husband, Arthur?"

"Your husband."

He was joking;—no, no, he meant it; she met his eyes, her chair grated on the tesselated pavement, she had backed away from him another inch or two.

"It is a simple question, Elsie; let us talk it over quietly."

He certainly was quiet enough, and she sat still as a statue, right against a palm-tree, and cold through and through. Arthur was so alarming, so desperately solemn, so stern, he must have looked like that when he won his Victoria Cross;

his kindliness, his genial smiles, his easy friendship all alike had gone.

"We have seen a great deal of each other, Elsie. Do you think I could make you happy? I would do my best."

She mumbled something civil, but vague.

"If you will marry me, if you think I could make you happy, the wedding must not be delayed for long. I shall be obliged to go back to India and my duties, Elsie."

She was silent. What a blunt, undecked question he had asked her. Was that the way in which full-fledged women were won? Might not the prospect of parting be hidden, somehow, in alluring uncertainty? He emphasized the fact of farewells and of India. Instinct told her that there was something amiss, something altogether wrong about the wording of his proposition. She looked at him scrutinisingly; she had never liked her V.C. so little as she did at the moment when he paid her this great honour.

"I don't think you really mean it."

"Elsie, do you imagine that a man jokes about such a matter?"

"I don't know," uneasily. "I haven't seen many men—but I don't believe you mean it."

"I ask you to marry me, Elsie."

"Yes—but you don't mean it."

"You have said that three times—it is hardly an answer to my question."

"It is the same as an answer."

"Then you don't like me, Elsie?"

"You know I like you, we all like you, everyone likes you. How could we help it? You have been so good to us."

These flattering generalities would not do, he intended to have a "yes" or "no."

"Do you like me well enough to marry me? Think for a moment."

She obeyed him and thought, though she had no cause to think, and despised the memories which came to her. Memories of the butcher's bill and other bills, of the food she ate, of the clothes she wore, of the conflict she had fought with Agnes long ago, of her mother, of Celia, of the boys, of the everlasting tug, tug, tug of the gaping ends of the Trevor income, wearying, eternal, hopeless strain!

At last she lifted her gloomy eyes to his face;

he had altered in this short time, she realised that if he wanted no more of her he at least wanted her answer with a deep, impatient earnestness of desire.

"I do not like you well enough for that. I could not go to India," trying to soften the bluntness of the reply, "it is so far away."

The tension of his face relaxed a little, the suspense had tried him, the loss of Elsie might be faced, perhaps.

"If you liked me well enough to marry me," he said, slowly, "there would be no 'away.' Where I was would be your home and all you wanted."

"Would it?" dubiously.

Major Wyndham smiled, the colour had come back into his face, Elsie was less afraid of him, the solemnity, the great seriousness of his manner was passing off. The song was ended, but the air of the ballad lingered in the hearer's ears.

"Yes, Elsie, it would, indeed."

"But I could not leave everybody—for some one—new."

"If there was no question of leave-taking? If I did not go to India at all, would that alter the case? Think it over a moment, Elsie?"

"I have thought."

"And it was no good?"

"None at all; it is to *feel,* not to *think,* Arthur."

There was a touch of unconscious dignity in these last words.

"You are not going to be angry with me, Elsie, because of this? There is no reason why we should be less good friends in future, is there?"

"None—but I wish you had not said all this."

"Won't you forget it has been said?"

She assented eagerly, that was just what she would do, she would forget. She wanted to be as they had been, no change at all. She did not like "nonsense," he winced at the word, but he was acquiescent; there should be no more "nonsense," he promised, they would both forget all that had been said, it was a secret they shared, but which should be buried out of their sight.

"You'll soon forget," Elsie had risen and her eyes were lightened by a spark of malice, "very soon, because I don't believe you meant it, Arthur."

"You are as unimpressionable as Precautia."

Major Wyndham showed a courage, worthy of

his reputation, over his rebuff; he had recovered his usual manner; if there was a sad look in his worn eyes, unobservant Elsie did not notice it.

The rectory carriage was the last to leave the Oaks. Major Wyndham and Max had elected to walk the short distance home together, the rector was talking to his host, and Agnes accompanied Elsie to the cloak-room.

"Well," she said, "has it been nice, Elsie? Have you enjoyed yourself?"

"Yes, I enjoyed myself. I—I liked the ice pudding."

"You look so lovely."

"Precautia said I looked quite pretty."

Elsie was enveloping herself in her cloak, she was standing back to her sister; in the glass she saw her beautiful face. Was that face the traitor which had induced Arthur to say things that he had not meant? She made an unflattering grimace at her reflection, yet she exonerated the offender from blame, she did not believe he had even seen that she had a face in the conservatory;—and she was to forget what he had said, not to puzzle her head as to why he had said it.

"You haven't enjoyed yourself, Elsie."

"Oh, yes; but not so very much."

"You were a long while—in—the conservatory."

"Yes, a very, very long while; we missed your song."

"You could hear it there."

"But we didn't listen; Arthur talked."

"He looks tired, Elsie."

"Does he?"

"I thought he looked ill."

"A touch of ague, I think he said. He is going away to-morrow."

"Yes, to the Lelys—but only for a week."

"For longer than that, Agnes."

"What do you mean, Elsie? Not—for altogether?"

"For a fortnight. Yes, Mr. Wyndham, I am coming. Good-night, Aggie; you look like the Queen of Sheba—in her minority. Good-night."

No wonder Elsie was quiet and had not thoroughly enjoyed herself, for Major Wyndham had said good-bye, and a fortnight was a weary long time.

CHAPTER VI.

'Tis with our judgment as our watches, none
Go just alike, yet each believes his own.

POPE.

THE winter had rolled on into spring, and no outward changes had befallen Dorfold. Events which had been counted on as a certainty, and anticipated long ago, were apparently as far off as ever, and hope deferred made one or two elderly, match-making hearts sick. Still Mrs. Trevor lay helpless on her couch, still Elsie nursed and stitched, taught Celia, and rode far and wide through the countryside with Major Wyndham. Still Major Wyndham stayed at home, and still the rector planned and plotted for his happiness, though he fretted himself at the tedious tardiness of the courtship.

"Happy the wooing that's not long a-doing."

Arthur's wooing was preposterously lengthy; no doubt a woman's wit was required to bring about the inevitable crisis, and the rector was

well pleased that his daughter Lucy was coming down to Dorfold. She was essentially a woman of action, she was a determined and practical person, she would have no hesitation in administering a shove in the right direction to any man, woman, or child who held back from the performance of their duty. And Arthur's duty was clear to the whole world,—and yet, but a night or two ago, he had talked of his return to India, talked of it as by no means a remote contingency. Had he any intention of returning thither without a wife? Surely not! His son was a man of honour, who would not treat a girl such as Elspeth Trevor lightly.

The rector had endeavoured to broach the subject, which lay so near his heart, to Arthur then and there, but the young man would not take a hint, nor understand an innuendo; he was deaf, dull, blind to his father's meaning. So the rector pinned his hopes on Lady Lely—she was a woman of the world, she would know what to do and how to do it; she was coming at Easter, and Easter was close at hand; he would wait on patiently until then.

Elsie, herself, manifested no uneasiness, the

most fanciful sentimentalist on earth could have discovered no symptoms of love-sickness in her manner to Major Wyndham. Precautia was no more unconstrained in her friendship for the gentleman than was she. No doubt Arthur knew his own method, and was doing what he thought best. But the rector was tender-hearted, he was ridiculously sensitive about the Trevor girls, they were, one and all, dear to him, and the gossip amongst the neighbours, the expectations unfulfilled, the sharp tongues which handled the subject freely were a source of constant and keen annoyance. Would they ever be satisfactorily silenced? Doubtless they would. He was letting his imagination run away with him,—who but a beautiful neighbour could have kept and could still keep this son of his contentedly in a quiet country village? Arthur even grumbled at those invitations which might not well be refused, and when he did go away he invariably returned before his time was fully up and before he was expected to do so.

Perhaps the young people understood one another, but Arthur—pshaw, it was only fancy on his father's part, and yet fancy asserted its

deceptive voice and insisted that Arthur was more reserved, less communicative, less frank than of old; though he talked as much as ever, yet the talk seldom sank beneath the surface, and his laughter was as loud over an inferior as over a superior joke.

When so much real sorrow was rife in the world, how could the rector allow himself to sit idle in the study worrying himself weary about a matter which contained no positive ill? Had he grown such an impatient, faithless person? For shame. All comes to him who waits;—though the watched pot never boils.

In the dusk of an April evening Mr. Wyndham was sitting in his study ruminating somewhat in that rambling fashion when there came a soft and nervous tap upon the panels of his door. He was glad to turn the current of his thoughts into a fresh direction, and he cried "come in" cheerfully. He was not altogether surprised when Elsie Trevor opened the door, for she had been in his thoughts so much that it seemed natural she should be near him: he was always glad at any excuse that brought her

to the rectory, and he rose with a smile to welcome her.

"Arthur told me you were here," she said. "Precautia is with him in the smoking-room, I wanted to speak to you alone."

Her face was grave and earnest, it was clouded with great anxiety, at the presence of which Mr. Wyndham's heart grew heavy. He asked her, hurriedly, "what she wanted, what was wrong?"

"Everything is wrong," she answered, dismally enough, with a catch in her voice.

This was just what his imagination had foretold, Elsie was in trouble.

"Sit down here,"—he motioned her, thoughtful for her modesty, to the duskiest corner of the dusky room,—"and tell me all about it."

"I don't know what to do, so I came to you."

"Quite right, quite right, my dear child. I am the very person to whom to come."

"It is kind of you to say that; I was afraid I ought to have asked Mortimer."

"No, no."

"Mortimer would not understand that trying and talking are no good."

"Open your heart to me," said the rector, distressed beyond measure. "Speak as you would to your own father; all you say shall be kept inviolate for ever."

But, when the trouble came out, it was not of the description which he had anticipated,—the trouble was of *money*, not of *love*. No blame rested on the hearer's kith and kin, so he could breathe again, though Elsie choked as she laid bare to his relieved ears all her grinding cares. It seemed that the two ends of the Trevors' tiny income could not be induced to meet, they gaped wide asunder; all Elsie's contrivances, scrapings, and economies had been of no avail; no ingenuity within her power would bridge the horrid chasm, the gap increased in lieu of diminishing, and she was driven to her wits' end by Lady-day bills and Lady-day rent.

"I might have talked to Mortimer," she said, unsteadily, "but he has done so much, and it is his rent, and it distresses Agnes when he is—*particular,*" (the hearer understood the meaning of "particular" used thus). "Something must be done, talking is no good;" then she put her

head down on the table and hid her face. "We must leave Hillsden."

"Don't, don't, my dear, don't distress yourself, things might be much worse; your debts are a mere trifle. The clouds will lighten, change will come;" and then, forcing the momentous words from his lips, "you have a whole lifetime of happiness before you—you may—marry."

"No," positively, almost sharply, as though the idea was one which was to be dismissed from her own mind as well as from his. "Agnes did that, I could not; I am not unselfish, anything is better than that."

No wonder that his son protracted his declaration, if this was the attitude adopted by the lady. The rector's reply was spoken with constraint.

"My dear, to marry is not always to sacrifice yourself."

"Not always—but often. And—and it is no use to talk of what *may be,* but what *is.* I have thought it all over, I have thought of nothing else for weeks. We must face it, Mr. Wyndham; and, after all, it is not so bad. Hillsden is too big for us now, and the rent is more than we

can pay. We could be happy in a cottage; my mother would not mind where she was, so long as we are with her. Your cottage by the river is to let; we could furnish it with a few things from home, and sell the rest to pay the bills. That would set us clear, we could start fresh."

"You could do all that, no doubt; but I do not think your brother-in-law would like you to resort to such extreme measures."

"He will not like it, he will think that people will talk; but I cannot help what he thinks. Gossip does no harm, I don't mind what they say; it is one's own life in one's own home that makes one happy or unhappy."

What a philosopher this child was; she put her hearer to shame.

"You would not wish to bring dissension between your sister and her husband?"

"That is one reason why I came to you. Mortimer will listen to what I say if I can tell him that you agree with me; he always talks so much of you and so much of Arthur. I think, if I quoted you as my authority, he would agree to anything which was settled."

"But, Elsie, I do not think you may quote

me as an authority. I advise you to do nothing in a hurry; wait a little," with a wise shake of the head; "settle nothing just yet, wait until Easter, one never knows what a day may bring forth. The situation may alter, may improve."

"But, Mr. Wyndham, it can only alter for the worse. Nothing but money can help us; I am another pauper crying, 'I cannot dig, to beg I am ashamed.'"

"Aye, Elsie, and perhaps that poor man thought of the relation which his digging would affront. He should have gone to those who loved him, and received everything of which he was in need as his right."

"We have nowhere to go but—but to the—workhouse."

"My dear Elsie, the debts which seem so big to you would be a mere nothing to those who love you."

"But those who love me have no money, none, and if they were as rich as a Rothschild I would not take their money—to beg I am ashamed. I could not have come to you but that I knew you would understand that."

"Wait a little, my dear, you are impetuous,

the plan you suggest is all very well, and the cottage shan't be let just yet awhile, I promise you. But let me have time to reflect, do not decide such an important thing in a hurry. Wait."

"I have been waiting; I have done everything I could think of, Mr. Wyndham, I have, indeed, and it is all useless. Rent and taxes, coals, wages, food, washing, clothes and lights," drumming them off tragically upon her fingers, "you never would believe how much they cost, and they are all stupid, unsatisfactory things which must go on and on every single day. It is very hard to live, as the poor people say, very hard indeed."

"Wait a little, Elsie, take courage and wait."

"I would have waited longer, I would have tried again, but," her voice broke, "to-day I heard Max is ill. You know his cousin, Miss St. Maur, is dead, she died quite suddenly only a week before her wedding-day. It was the saddest thing I ever heard. Max was staying with them at the time. I daresay all the trouble made him ill,—his doctor has ordered him out of London, he is to come down to the country and have rest."

"Well, my dear?"

"He can't come home, to his only home, because," she blinked violently, "because we can't afford it. We can afford nothing, as a matter of fact we cannot afford to exist. Poverty is such a grim possession, one gets so *tired* of being poor. You must think I'm very wicked, Mr. Wyndham, but to-day I'm out of heart."

"My dear, I will write to Max and ask him here, poor boy."

"How kind of you, but I am afraid he cannot come. Colonel St. Maur has taken him to Eastbourne, they went down yesterday."

"As he has rest, and change, and care, Elsie, there is no reason why you should distress yourself."

"Agnes said that. I'm not distressing myself," mendaciously, "but it made me think, it made me see that we must not go on trying to do what was hopeless from the first. Sixpence won't do duty for a shilling, it's obstinate and refuses. We are overhoused, people have to leave their homes nowadays, and let strangers take the beautiful places where they and theirs have lived for centuries, it's done every day. If

your pocket's empty, a great many other odds and ends of yours are empty, too. Your cottage is pretty and cheap; we could be very happy in it—it is silly to be so fond of Hillsden, one house is the same as another."

"What rent do you pay?"

"One hundred and twenty pounds a year."

Mr. Wyndham received this information in silence; then he said, musingly,

"Four acres of ground, some glass, good stabling for a couple of horses. Put in thorough repair inside and out." He had a capital plan in his head.

Elsie wondered why he smiled, she thought he was a little wanting in sympathy; but poverty was an old evil, not a startling novelty; the rector had seen and could see it all around him, everywhere—he was used to it. "To do without" was a verb which Dorfolders conjugated quite as persistently as their pauper neighbours in Blankshire hamlets. When she saw the smile, Elsie remembered that her cares were own cousins to those of the majority of mankind; there was nothing specially lugubrious or original in being poor. The walk downhill from a big

house, which you cannot afford, to a small one, within your means, was an easy walk over which Mr. Wyndham smiled. The foot which wore the shoe felt the pinch; to onlookers the shoe was quite comfortable.

"Take my advice, Elsie," the rector said, cheerfully, "and wait awhile."

"If a thing must be done, is not waiting only waste of time?"

How true that was; but the rector said,

"Wait until Easter, my dear."

"And then you will talk to Mortimer?"

"Then I will do what you wish, and I hope what is done will be for your happiness. Your—happiness is very dear to—us."

It was extremely kind of him to say such affectionate things so warmly, and Elsie was proportionately grateful; but why, why, why were old people so cautious? What advantage could be gained by waiting? Waiting in this case cost money. If their old home must be left, Elsie wanted to leave it at a moment's notice. She could set her teeth and get through the wrench steadily enough; but how was she to face days, and weeks, and months of apprehension? This

interview had done no harm, she told herself; but, alas! she had done little good. She had made a clean breast of many things which she would fain have kept to herself, and the disagreeable disclosures had not had the consequences which she had foreseen, evidently the rector had known it all before; but she thanked him and went off, somewhat depressed, to call Precautia.

She had set her stone rolling; time would prove how fast and with what effect its course would be taken and its destiny reached.

Precautia was playing with Major Wyndham's terrier, she had him on her lap, and was whispering all sorts of tender epithets into his impatient ear; she was demonstratively affectionate, because poor Gumbo sat dejected upon the rug, with jealous uneasiness about him, which charmed his tormentor. Major Wyndham watched the pair with a rather grim and cynical expression, neither Gumbo's pain nor Catch's impatience seemed to amuse him.

Elsie grasped the situation at once.

"Put that dog down," she said; "you are such a torment. How can you have the heart to bully Gumbo?"

"It is only fun. I didn't think."

"You never think, that's no excuse. What use is your head to you? You should think?"

Precautia blushed.

"Go away, you nasty little dog," she cried, unjustly, to the terrier, which scrambled off her lap and hurried to his master's heels.

"The injurer abusing his victim," said Arthur; "that is orthodox. Don't scold her, Elsie, she can't help her instinct."

"I wish you would not always take Celia's part," Elspeth said, earnestly. "Even Agnes says you spoil her; when you have gone, she will have to be suppressed."

"Did Agnes say that?"

"No, I say it."

"When *I* have gone," repeated Major Wyndham to himself. "What, are you off this very moment, Elsie?"

"I have a letter to write."

"Ah, of course. I'm sorry to hear Max is laid up. Is he coming here?"

"No, he is at Eastbourne."

"Has he been over-working?"

"He says not. But the doctor tells him he is to be idle for months."

"Fortunate young man."

"You, yourself, Arthur, are the idlest of the idle," said Precautia, leading the home-ward way. "Don't pull my hair,

> 'Satan finds some mischief still
> For idle hands to do.' "

"Idle? Who wrote out the whole of *obtenir la bienveillance par la politesse* this morning, not a ditto allowed, and all the moods and tenses filled in?"

Elsie turned sharply upon him.

"Did you write that? It was too bad of you. I set it her because you told me she was rude to Mortimer."

"I apologise, Elsie; but the verb was such a monster, and, perhaps, Precautia was not rude, but merely candid; she argued to that end, and the punishment was severe."

"Not too severe: it fitted the crime. I hate rude people; yes, if it's what you call *candour,* it is just as repugnant—so easy to be frank, so difficult to receive frankness——"

"—Gracefully," added he. "You are young,

Elsie, you hate so many things, tolerance grows with the years. I like Precautia's candour."

"You were the person who said that she was rude to Mortimer."

"Arthur likes me to treat Mortimer as if he was—was Queen of Spain," pouted the little girl. "I can't keep different manners for different people, like he does."

"I'm going; good-bye. Precautia's talons would have routed Bismarck. Good-bye, Elsie, I shall be round to-morrow."

He was out of sight, and Celia sighed.

"How we shall miss him when he goes, Elsie."

"Yes, but I don't believe he will go. Agnes thinks he will stay on in England."

Major Wyndham was fitting in that panacea for masculine ailments, exercise before dinner. He did not return to the rectory yet awhile. Through the bare and stony lane which curved round the west hill, he trudged fast and far. At the gateway on the crest of the eminence overlooking Dorfold he paused, leaning his arms upon the top rail of the gate, and looking down upon the broad valley beneath. The twinkling lights

of the Oaks lay below; further on the village spread, flanked by the winding Dor. Not far beyond the river the railway ran; a train tore by; he saw the grey bridge by the level crossing, and bent his head upon his hands as he remembered all the bygone days.

Major Wyndham often rested at the gateway on the hill, it was a favourite haunt of his; labourers who plodded by on their homeward way saw him standing there and wondered what he found at which to stare so long in that mild panorama;—he, who had seen "the Indes," and had fought so rarely in his time. Blankshire was a dull place for the likes of him, but there, he knew what he was doing,

> "Different men have different taste,
> Some like 'save,' and some like 'waste.'"

Major Wyndham was not late for dinner, he arrived in the dining-room with the soup, and yet his father looked reproachfully at him,—reproachfully is too strong a word,—no one reproached Arthur now-a-days,—but Mr. Wyndham was worried, and he could not throw off the cloud even in the presence of his son.

"You have been a long time over the walk to Hillsden, Arthur."

"Yes, but I went further. I walked round the west hill."

"*They* went with you?"

"No. They went straight home."

The soup was good but Mr. Wyndham did not appreciate it, he was disturbed and harassed. His mind was full of Elsie, hitherto she had either ignored her poverty or treated it as a joke. Though the neighbours knew, as well as she, that poverty is no joke at all; no more humorous to its prey than sickness, or pain, or death, or any other of the thousand ills to which flesh is heir,

> "Yet they were glad to follow her lead,
> And laugh instead of groan."

To-day, however, poor Elsie had changed her custom and groaned most heartily, the groans had gone straight to the rector's heart. Those groans might be hushed, those tears might be dried in such a simple, pleasing manner. Opposite to him sat his impervious son, in whose hands all power lay, but who would not use it. Did he know what the delay meant? and did he

deliberately allow the poor girl to fret about a future for which she need provide nothing, a future which the Wyndhams would arrange? He was a little annoyed with Arthur, but he could not speak out, he could not interfere; he must wait for Lady Lely, her self-reliance was stupendous and communicated itself to her father, and yet waiting was cruel to Elsie. Might he not give Arthur another hint? might he not give a diplomatic shove in the right direction? Arthur must shed his reserve some day or other, let him speak to-night. Truth will out; under some circumstances it is not specially gratifying to meet naked truth face to face, but in this case the truth was beauty, and beauty truth. Mr. Wyndham was eager to have it on view to the world.

The rector's tact was not his dominant characteristic. He could hold his tongue—as alas, his son could do,—with the best, but when it came to woman's work, to veiled insinuations; mystic, but meaning, allusions; hints, suggestions, he blundered,—like a man.

And so it was that night. As long as Jane was waiting at table, the father and son talked of

little beyond their food and the weather; the conversation was eminently flat, Jane had nothing to bring away which was worth reporting in the kitchen. But when they were left alone and Arthur, muttering something about a pipe and "garden," evidently intended to be off, the rector would not have it.

"No, no, Arthur, don't go. That's a good bottle of claret; come, fill your glass. Many attractions take you away from me; I don't grudge the time you spend at Hillsden, but your pipe's a rival I won't tolerate. You can smoke here."

Arthur laughed, reseated himself, and filled his glass.

"I should be sorry were there no attractions, beside your father, to keep you dangling at Dorfold, Arthur."

The young man did not respond to the rector's smile.

"For auld lang syne I like the place," he said, slowly.

"What have you to do with auld lang syne? Pshaw! in auld lang syne we couldn't keep you in Dorfold for a week together. It was 'dull as ink;' you were 'bored to death' down here."

"One's tastes change, father. I shall be very sorry when the time comes to say good-bye to Dorfold."

"Why should that time come? Why should it ever come, Arthur? You are not an ambitious fellow, not at all. You have done your duty in action, do your duty in peace. Leave the army; give up all thought of returning to India. I have told you a dozen times that I can afford to make your future easy for you."

"I know how good you are."

"Don't make me speeches. If you want to make me a present, give me what I want. Give me a daughter, Arthur."

Arthur laughed as a man might laugh at a jest, in which no truth lay hidden; he was lighting his pipe, and did not speak. The rector went on, this time a little nervously, for he sailed very near the wind.

"There is a great deal of trouble in the world —the evil that men do lives after them, and its life is tough and hard. Poor Trevor's burden of debt lies heavy on those children of his. Elsie was here to-day."

"I know she was."

"Yes, but you didn't know her trouble; you didn't see the tears in her eyes and hear the pitiful way she spoke. She had no one to go to, so she came to me, dear child. Hacket's a curious fellow, Arthur; rich as a nabob, and yet he lets those people suffer want—aye, positive want. He allows their poverty to mop up the pleasures of their youth—and Agnes married him, a good girl and a sweet girl. I have never understood how she could have made up her mind to have done so."

"Knowing her, knowing him, and knowing the circumstances, in the name of reason, what clearer explanation could you want?"

"Elsie would not have done it;" hurriedly. He had cast a reflection on the family, and Arthur had waxed hot and angry. "Elsie could not have done it; she has such courage, such patience." Here was a sop for Cerberus.

"Patient, is she? I had not thought so."

"Patient in tribulation," vexed in his turn, "and so devoted to those whom she loves, so anxious that Agnes should not be distressed; the girls are greatly attached to one another. Though Agnes has much personal luxury, yet I think she

must, in some degree, suffer with her sisters—she cannot be completely satisfied with her solitary prosperity."

"Satisfied—happy?" Major Wyndham's voice was still harsh and rough. "How you misjudge her!"

"I don't misjudge a mercenary marriage. No one has a right to make a mockery of a holy office. False vows remain false vows, no matter why or in what cause they are sworn."

"Precept upon precept," said Arthur, quickly. "Simple enough to hear or to—speak. Did you never think how a thousand influences work, wheel within wheel, grinding such a woman to her—martyrdom?"

"Good heavens, Arthur, what are you talking about? Women who make love-matches have often more reason to complain of their bad fortune than Agnes Hacket. There's no vice about her husband, he's a very good man of his kind, he's done her no wrong, unless loving her is a wrong. You speak in an exaggerated way. Though I deplored the marriage because I was disappointed in the girl, though I know we can't plant thistles and reap myrtles, yet I keep my

pity where pity is due. I keep it for those who work, and pinch, and struggle in the place where Providence placed them. It is Elsie whom I——"

"Yes," Arthur interrupted, beginning to pace up and down the room, "it is of Elsie we were speaking; Elsie is the person whom everyone praises, of whom I hear so very often. But, just now, I can't talk rationally, my arm is talking irrationally to me."

"Can the doctor do nothing for you?"

"He *does* a great deal, but no good. Neuralgia is a very obstinate—button-holder."

Major Wyndham's set face spoke of pain; he was often, of late, driven wild by neuralgia, which had settled, like the unconquerable demon that it is, in his wounded arm.

"You must go to London and see a specialist."

"Yes, I must; but I shan't lose the pain altogether, I'm afraid, till I get back to India."

"You mean to return?"

"Yes."

"But—but—you won't go *alone,* Arthur?"

Major Wyndham was face to face, eyes to eyes with his father, his bronzed face had been

pale before, but it was paler now, and lined with pain. He shook his head.

"Alone," he repeated; and then he added, after a long silence, "If this is to be part of my arm, father, I shall leave the arm behind me here; the pain's sharp, it won't let me talk. I'm better walking; I'll go out."

And he went—Mr. Wyndham's opportunity had passed, he had done no good, he was half-afraid he had done harm, he wished he had left it all to Lucy. Arthur had been annoyed, and was pacing the terrace both in pain and anger now. A steady footfall reached the rector's ears far on into the night.

Poor Arthur, the pain in his arm was fierce, unbearable; he was not spared the pang, though the arm had been shattered nobly in defence of a comrade and weakened in honourable warfare.

CHAPTER VII.

The budding flow'ret blushes at the light,
  The mees besprinkled with the yellow hue,
In daisied mantles is the mountain dight,
  The neshe young cowslip bendeth with the dew;
The trees enleafed, into heaven straught,
When gentle winds do blow, to whistling din is brought.

The evening comes, and brings the dew along,
  The rodie welkin sheeneth to the eyne,
Around the alestake minstrels sing the song,
  Young ivy round the doorpost doth entwine;
I lay me on the grass; yet to my will,
Albeit all is fair, there lacketh something still.

CHATTERTON.

"HERE you are; I hoped you would come," said Precautia, getting up to welcome him who came day after day and day after day to the Hillsden school-room.

"Are you busy, Precautia?"

The third finger of the hand he held was steeped to the knuckle in ink; there was a fagged, lessony pucker visible on the small scrap of forehead which the ruffled tangles of Celia's hair dis-

closed; before her on the table Otto's German grammar lay, it was open at the confounding exercise which precedes the story of "Der Edle Offizier," Part II.

"I ought to be busy; Elsie thinks I *am* busy, but there was this 'Edle Offizier,' I couldn't help reading it. I thought of *you*—don't you see?"

"You all harp on that subject for ever,"—there were manifestations of unreasonable impatience at this tendency of theirs about Major Wyndham,—"can't you ever divide me, the thought of me, from that business? I am tacked on to my cross, the cross is never *tacked* on to me."

"You couldn't be tacked on to a more splendid thing," said Precautia, primly.

"If it had not been for that bit of luck of mine, if it hadn't been for that most inappropiate adjective *edel,* which you will most inappropriately and eternally mix up with me, you—you—" he broke off laughing; what reason had he to rave at the child?

Precautia looked up at him, and, laying her inky hand tenderly on his bronzed fist, she quoted Caroline,

"If ifs and ans were pots and pans,
There'd be no work for tinkers' hands.

"Of course one does not know what they would do, and you are an 'edler offizier,' Arthur; and, Arthur; and, if you hadn't been so *edel,* I'm sure I should have loved you just as much."

"So I must live up to my reputation," he responded to the clutch of those wiry fingers, and patted the inky hand. "Live up, not down—eh, Celia?"

"As long as you live near, I don't mind how you do it. You always listen when I talk; you hear, too, and remember. It has been different since you came, everyone is happier—everyone but Elsie."

"Isn't she any better to-day?"

"She's not cross, she is so glad because Nat is coming."

"Is he? When?"

"He doesn't say when; the letter came just now; he's got leave, and he is going to surprise us. We were to let you know, but not Mortimer; so, when you go to the Oaks, don't tell Agnes till you are alone with her."

"I'm not going there."

The words meant much to the speaker, but a scratching pen was the only answer they got. If there was a piece of news to spread, Celia preferred to do it herself; therefore, if Arthur despised the treat she had offered him, so much the better for her.

It was a lovely spring day; the air was fresh, but warm with sunshine, the sky was blue as blue could be, and absolutely cloudless. The busy sunbeams searched out the shabbiness of the room with relentless candour, but shone upon Precautia as they shone on the flowers. Major Wyndham stood by the open window looking out upon the forlorn unkemptness of the stable-yard. Bowers of traveller's-joy hung in plumes or strayed in flowery sprays over the pink and crumbling cob-wall. Tall weeds waved, and curtsied, and whispered in the light breeze, a flourishing array of nodding weeds claiming their right to live and love life as do their lucky kinsfolk, the flowers.

"What do you see in the yard, Arthur?"

"I see the—old times, Precautia. I was trying to see—the new ones."

"It is chock-full of weeds, you mean, unless they are rooted up soon you won't be able to get

out to the gate, Caroline says. She wants me to dig them up, but it's so much trouble and no good, for they grow again. I wonder why there are such things as weeds?"

"Why not wonder why a tooth can ache, or a bramble prick? Doesn't Elsie teach you, why? —What a lovely day!"

"It's always lovely when I'm doing German," depressed. "Elsie can't correct my exercises without a key. Can you respect a governess who wants a key?"

"Respect anyone who owns a weak point? of course not. Respect is out of fashion. People don't even respect their Creator now-a-days. His methods are too slow, or incomprehensible. No one believes in perfection, and yet they clamour for it, Celia."

"Do they? Well, I don't know what people do, because except you and the girls no one speaks to me. Arthur, this exercise won't be *perfection* if you talk all the time."

"How soon will it be done? I'm going for a row."

Celia laid down her pen, ink and all, on her book and opened her mouth.

"You look as if you'd like to come."

"May I?"

"As far as I'm concerned, of course you may."

"Is the river full enough?"

"Over-full if anything, we have had a lot of rain lately."

"May Elsie come?"

"No, the boat's small, it won't stand any horse-play. I can't trust you two together, you get out of hand. I'll go and get the boat ready; follow me to the boat-house. How long shall you be over that Double Dutch?"

"Ten minutes if I do it—anyhow." Precautia's nose skimmed her book, her forehead was a labyrinth of wrinkles, she was smudging up her blot messily. "I can row myself, and steer, and swim a stroke or two, and I wish you'd take poor Elsie. *Endlich wir haben die Wahrheit entdecken,* or *entdecken die Wahrheit,*—Arthur, which is it?"

But Major Wyndham clapped his hands over his ears, shook his head, and went away. She looked after him for a moment; each day he brought some pleasure into her life, she associated him with all the small delights,—the "treats," in her phraseology,—which meant so much to the

child. Which mean much to grown-up children too, whose talk is bigger than any other part of them; our little span of life is cram-full of trivialities which make or mar our joy and which will not be ignored. Arthur Wyndham's tongue was gentle and considerate, he did not pet the child and tease her by turn as did her brothers, he was "always the same," she said tenderly. A man of such calibre wins a reward, the sower of kindness is the reaper of love. Arthur looked back and met Celia's eyes; he smiled in response to that look, he knew the meaning of it, he had seen it in other eyes—he wished, he tried to to wish that he had not seen it.

Precautia galloped through her exercise, tore off to her room, wriggled into a pilot coat, set a broad-leafed hat on her tangled head, and then, restraining her impatience, stole on tiptoe into her mother's room to ask Elsie, who was sitting there, for leave of absence.

There was no occasion for tiptoe walking. Mrs. Trevor was sitting up, she had an early visitor. Agnes was with her. Mr. Hacket had gone to a county council meeting, he would be away for hours, and Agnes was "free," she said,

laughing, and "freedom meant Hillsden, of course." When she heard whither Celia was flying, in such jubilant spirits, she said that she would go down to the boat-house to see the crew off; she loved the river on a hot day, she loved the spring, she loved a walk, it was evident she "loved life and saw good days."

If Elsie was vaguely disappointed at thus being left alone she did not own as much, even to herself, but she wondered why she had tortured herself with depths of unspeakable pity for a trouble which was no trouble at all; she grudged all the emotion she had wasted upon that dove-like sister, who was cooing away this morning in the sunshine. Clad in a dove-grey dress, with feathers curling round her throat, her face shaded by a dove-coloured hat, Agnes looked more like a dove than ever,—sleek, soft, serene, a happy dove.

People got tired of being down-hearted, they threw off depression. Elsie wished she could feel a little more cheerful that morning; her spirits had sunk under all the money troubles, she made such valiant struggles to keep things straight in the household; these struggles, like the struggles

of a drowning man, served but to exhaust her strength, bringing her no whit nearer the shore.

However, Easter was approaching, she pinned her faith on Easter and the good deeds that should then be done to ease the strain upon the Trevor purse, and Easter was close at hand. Patience, she schooled herself to patience. *Le bon temps viendra,* was the Trevor's motto; it was easy to the members of that ilk to believe in *Le bon temps,* though it was never so long a-coming.

The way to the river was all downhill. Celia danced along the village street, holding to Agnes' arm and talking incessantly. Outside a cottage door, in a rough cage, a lark was singing his heart out behind his prison bars, the song flooded the street from end to end. They paused a moment and looked at him.

"He sings as though he was soaring up," Celia said. "Poor thing! he's forgotten, and it is such a stuffy little cage."

"I daresay he doesn't mind the cage, he is used to it," said Agnes, through her rose-coloured spectacles. "He's taken good care of, he won't starve in the winter, Precautia."

When they left the village behind them, they clambered a stile, taking a short cut, across the glebe meadow, to the rectory boat-house. Buttercups, daisies, pale cuckoo flowers, harsh-hued orchids, broad-leaved heliobore, and tufts of cowslips grew in the clover,—they crushed the flowers at every step leaving a track in broken blossoms and drooping grass.

The Dor was a bad boating river; in a dry season its shallows were unnavigable, at its best it was a difficult stream to traverse, and wanted a boatman who knew its eccentricities and would humour the capricious water on his way. For here it rippled not a foot deep over the stones; there, fed by the Dorfold brook, it deepened, narrowed, and tore round the Knowle between high wooded lands, silent, swift, strong, implacable; then again it widened out, eddying and smiling, hurrying and growling, never making up its mind whether it was at play or at war until it rushed down the chasm betwixt the cliffs into the sea to its death—to its new life after death.

In old days the Trevor sons had boated, but the daughters, in tenderness for their mother's nerves, had foreborne from doing so.

On hearing approaching footsteps, Major Wyndham emerged from the boat-house with a pipe in his mouth and a cushion in his hand. He looked summer-like in flannels, and his straw hat tilted over his eyes. Celia fancied that he was not altogether pleased as he came out into the sunshine, she fancied that he was angry with her for bringing an uninvited guest to make an extra weight in his boat, and she hastened to set his mind at rest.

"She's only come to see us off, Arthur. Mortimer's away to-day and she had got nothing to do, so she just walked down with me."

"It is such a lovely day," Agnes said. "I could not stay indoors."

"'Well apparel'd April on the heel of limping Winter,'" quoted Major Wyndham. "Yes, the day is not amiss." He was in the boat by this time, arranging the cushions, loosening the mooring cord. "Poor old winter kicked out at a moment's notice, spring overlooked, this is a leap to summer itself."

"So hot, so beautiful,—so different,—last week we shivered."

Agnes was looking up the stream as she

spoke, the water murmured at her feet; it was deep and turbulent, but the shadows lay on its surface rocking drowsily. In the lowland meadow opposite the daffodils, kept back till now by keen winds, had suddenly spread, like a yellow cloud, on the green turf. The "lush young cowslip's" glory was eclipsed, he looked faint and sickly enough in the sunshine.

"Next week we shall shiver again," Major Wyndham returned, manœuvring his little craft alongside the starting-step. "It's very nice this summer sunshine, but it won't last. Come, Celia."

"Wait one moment, you are in such a dreadful hurry. I want a bunch of cuckoo-flowers; I like them best of all. What a fuss the buzzy-bees are in to-day. I wish we hummed and buzzed and ate honey when we worked."

"You can pick your flowers when we get back. If you wish to come in this boat, I advise you to get in now. I'm just off."

"All right, I'm coming; give me your hand. Bah, how it rocked!"

"Steady, Precautia; take the cords. You can steer?"

"I have steered—on the sea."

"Well, eyes in the boat and do as I tell you. Your right hand is the pocket-side, remember."

"And my left for a wedding-ring," said Celia, soothingly, "I can always remember which is which."

Major Wyndham was usually more genial over the "treats" which he bestowed upon her. If he was going to be cross, she would rather stay at home; if he did not want to take her on the river, very well, she did not want to go. Celia was awed by his gravity, but Agnes stood amongst the willows; beyond her an almond-tree, in a cloud of delicate pink, rose against the sky; her hands were clasped behind her, her chin was tilted up, she noticed nothing wrong in his manner; she saw the golden daffodils, the violets on the sunny bank, the sleeping shadows, the sunshine, the cloudless sky.

"Take me," she said; "the river is so beautiful. Take me. I want to come."

How Agnes blundered! Celia blushed for her, but Major Wyndham answered, very gently,

"The boat, with Celia in it, is hardly safe for you."

He spoke with great politeness, but he rowed

out into the stream. Precautia's heart was touched by her sister's disappointment; poor Agnes, left to watch upon the bank alone—watching was hard work.

"Oh, Arthur, let her come; I will not move a finger. I will sit glued in the corner. It is so seldom she can come with us at all. She wants to come; do take her, Arthur."

Major Wyndham did as he was asked to do; he backed water, and pulled up alongside the bank, grasping hold of the willow with his hand.

"You hear what Celia says, Mrs. Hacket? I can only take a cargo of two if they are *under control.* Will you come?"

"Are you not afraid?"

"If Celia is as good as her word—no."

"It is not dangerous?"

"You know the danger—a minimum of risk if she misbehaves, otherwise none."

"He would not take you if it was dangerous," impatiently from Celia. Agnes was a self-invited passenger who feigned to hesitate over the acceptance of her own suggestion—this was ridiculous!

"Get in, Aggie, quickly; the bank is crumbly lower down."

So Agnes "got in," and seated herself by her little sister. With long, slow strokes, in which he put forth all his strength, Major Wyndham pulled the little boat up stream; it shot quickly through the resisting water.

"The current is strong," said Agnes. "You have to work hard, Arthur; why not drift down to Yelverton,, drift right down, leave the boat there, and walk back?"

He shook his head; Celia explained his objection to drifting.

"Arthur wants exercise; men always want exercise as much as they want their dinner."

"You forget the weir, Mrs. Hacket, between us and Yelverton. I must row against the stream first or last. I'll work against the current while my sick arm holds out; coming back I can take it easy."

He pulled hard, not relaxing the pace, though it was the very day for drifting in the warm, sweet air, through the sunshine, past the shadows, with the murmuring rush of water, the whispering of flags and rushes, and the far-off songs of many birds in the ears. But Celia liked the rush through the water, she liked to hear the wet keel

cutting the river, and to see the ripples and wavelets cast broadcast from the bow of their boat.

"How fast you go, how strong you are! I love it, Arthur," she cried, paddling with her hands in the water, resigning to Agnes her cords and her duties. "Did you see the fish rise—such a big one—over there? Arthur, when are you going to fish on the moor? I love those little moor trout, they are so good."

"When I can throw a fly, Precautia; I'm afraid that means never, my arm wants oiling, the joints don't work as they did."

"But it is much better; it must be better, or you couldn't row so fast?"

"I don't humour it, I turn a deaf ear to its remonstrances; it must make shift to do my work for me as long as I want it. Discipline must be maintained."

"How silly you are; you are talking nonsense. If you can't throw a fly, you can fish with a worm."

Major Wyndham smiled at Agnes. How often she had toiled after him with a mustard-tin and a sick heart.

"The days of worms are over, Precautia, for me. It's an unpleasant subject, let us turn it,—

do you hear that cuckoo? There he is behind you, on the sycamore."

"I hate a cuckoo, he hasn't any feeling, and he always says the same; he's a bore, but he's interesting the first time you hear him, for then he cuckooes how many years will pass before you marry. He cuckooed thirty-three times for me this year, and only once for Elsie. It," sadly, "is a long time for me to wait. How many times did he cuckoo for you, Arthur?"

"This is the first time I've heard him, Precautia; he began five minutes ago, he's at it still. I'm afraid that I'm a doomed bachelor."

Celia began to count rapidly, but presently desisted, saying,

"I really am afraid you are,—and I can't *understand*, because she—"

"The left cord, please, Mrs. Hacket; you nearly shot us upon those stones. Left, left——"

"The hand with the wedding-ring," cried Celia. "Yours is as big as a curtain-ring,—a splendid guide: you've no excuse to forget, Aggie, and you pulled the pocket-side twice."

"Take the cords, Precautia; they worry your sister. I gave them to you, and they are wet."

"They won't hurt my frock," said the child, graciously; "nothing could hurt it."

She took the cords, they were a responsibility which handicapped her delight; Agnes reaped the privilege of being smart. Major Wyndham considered that grey gown. He was more careful of it than was the owner, for Mrs. Hacket, according to the inevitable habit of her sex, hung her arm over the side of the boat and trailed her idle left hand through the tepid water,—the sleeve, wringing wet at the wrist, clung to her. On her lap lay a small heap of rings which she had stripped off her fingers,—emeralds and diamonds, sapphires and rubies,--they gleamed in the sunshine, and she, notwithstanding her gender, did not look their way; she played absently with them, but her soft eyes were far away. More than once her wedding-ring slipped down to the knuckle of her finger, and she lifted her dripping hand and pushed it back to its right place; the circlet was a world too wide for the slim tenement.

She was content, for

> ". . . nature that is beautiful and dumb,
> Like a cool sleep upon the pulses broods."

The sun was not fierce with the stifling heat of a summer noon, his warmth was temperate, and drew the scent of the clover from the fields; the light breeze blew it across the river. In the hedges thousands of new-born primroses crept out into life, the copper-red cattle munched the "daisied mantles" of the land, and no "restless thought" stole into the "indolent heart" to warn it of the clouds which were driving up from the south-west and which were hidden by the Knowle hill.

It was pleasant on the river; it was pleasant to talk with those who knew her trivial thoughts, and cared to know them, and never found the thoughts too small to be worth consideration,—the little things which made her little life seem as big to the hearers as to her. Her pleasures, her hopes, her fears were not ignored. She was enjoying life, to-morrow and to-morrow she would again enjoy it.

The crew of the little boat laughed and talked the flying moments happily away. Major Wyndham no longer rowed at racing pace; they had pulled up once or twice at the bank to gather forget-me-nots. Much time had passed, they had heard the chime of the church-clock re-

peatedly, it had hurried away the quarters with incredible speed, and Arthur, who looked a little fagged with his labour, suggested that it was getting late.

As the boat turned, a chilly wind blew up the river, and a cloud obscured the face of the sun.

"It's time we went home," said Precautia, with resignation, "because it's going to rain."

"These April showers come on quickly; you'll get wet through."

"Can't we shelter under that clump of trees?"

"No, the current is too strong up here; we must tether the boat if we are to keep her stationary."

"Don't do that; we shan't hurt."

"I love the rain," Celia said, holding up her face. "I felt a lovely great spatter on my chin."

"Steady, Celia; eyes in the boat. We must put on a spurt and bustle along."

As he spoke, before his lips had closed on his last word, Agnes gave a cry and started up, plunging her left hand, which she had been trailing alongside the boat, deep into the water.

"My wedding-ring," she shrieked; "it's gone, —I've lost it."

The boat lurched.

"Don't, don't, you'll upset us," Celia cried, catching at her dress; but Agnes had lost her head. Tearing her hand from Arthur's steadying clutch, she gave a second plunge, deeper, more reckless than the first, after the ring which lay twelve feet below upon the stones on the bed of the river.

It was done in an instant; another lurch, a loud cry, a frantic effort to right the reeling boat, frustrated by the frightened girls, then a great splash, half-drowned in shrieks for help;—the boat was over, its crew were struggling in the Dor, where the water tore between deep rotten banks, where the current was swift and strong. One, alone, of the crew could swim, and his wounded arm was wearied out, weak as a woman's.

CHAPTER VIII.

"Sick for a voice that he should hear
Ah, never, never more."

ELSIE stood on the steps leading to the Hillsden front door, and looked expectantly down the drive. Her face wore a totally different expression to that with which she had watched her sisters set out a couple of hours previously. Then she had tried to look cheerful, now she was spontaneously radiant, her lips were dimpled, her eyes sparkled. After standing for two seconds in the sunshine, she whisked round again and ran into the house.

In this foolishly, unfashionably (nay, fatally; for what is so fatal to peace of mind as a large heart, largely inhabited?) attached family of Trevors the arrival of one of its members was an occasion of rejoicing—although the member was no creditable addition to the flock, but was of somewhat dingy, if not of absolutely swarthy hue.

Nat had arrived, he had followed on the heels of his letter, he had been better than his word. Stealthily creeping on tiptoe upstairs, he had listened a moment on the threshold of his mother's room, while he brushed his cuff across his eyes; then he had opened the door, and stood smiling and erect in the doorway.

If anyone remembered the pain which this soldier-boy had caused, it was not his sister Elsie who did so. His welcome was a thing which he took calmly as a matter of course, but he would not forget it. He sat down by his mother's couch, holding her fragile hand in his broad palm, and talking all the faster and more merrily, no doubt, because those well-remembered eyes, though they never left his face, had altered since last he saw them: because Elsie had clung to him, stammering and smiling, because she had not altered; because he was not so stout-hearted as he feigned.

He was widened out into a man, was Nat. He was kind and condescending as of yore; he looked so handsome, stalwart, and alert that Elsie was as proud and pleased as though he had returned home a commander-in-chief instead of a "common soldier," whose existence might be—

nay, was, by some,—considered a blot upon the family respectability.

Nat was restless with the inevitable restlessness of arrival, he wanted to see everything and everybody; he specially wanted Precautia, he knew the baby of the family would have no reproaches,—nothing but great admiration for his profession. He was a little disappointed that his "surprise" had had a limited audience.

"Wyndham's taken her up the river, has he?"

"Yes; she is always with Arthur, he is very fond of her."

"She's a nice little soul. I think I'll go and have a look for them. I should like to see him. Good-bye, mother, I shall be back again presently, I'm going to fetch Precautia."

Elsie grudged his absence, but after seeing him off at the gate she bethought herself of an important epoch in her brother's day,—his dinner. The larder shelves were not groaning beneath any weight, unfortunately. Caroline's chop and Mrs. Trevor's chicken were there, so was the bacon for the dining-room,—a hungry brother could not be welcomed on bacon, and Nat must

not suspect how small, how little fastidious were the home-appetites just now.

Elsie sent Caroline to the butcher's for a leg of mutton, which is an economical joint; carved from the back, handled thoughtfully, its staying powers excel those of all other joints. She could not face the butcher and his "rendered account," so she set herself to prepare the dining-room.

Caroline was not a good messenger; she "held with gossip as a cheap amusement for the poor," as Celia had once quoted in self-defence, and when she got the chance would amuse herself thus, lavishly.

It was evident that she was doing so that day. Elsie fretted at the protracted delay; an hour passed, and still Caroline did not return. Mrs. Trevor had had her lunch, the table was spread, shining glass and silver, fresh flowers, spotless linen, all ready, save the mutton.

It was no good feeling angry with Caroline; there was a chance that the butcher had no mutton, there was a still more disquieting chance that the butcher refused to allow Caroline to take the mutton which he had. This hypothesis sobered Elsie; she left off running to the door

every two minutes, as she had been doing, and sat down in the school-room. Gumbo pattered in and out of the room, pricking his ears at every sound.

"Where is Precautia, Gumbo?" she asked, for the dog always knew his mistress's name. Gumbo whined and looked up questioningly into the speaker's face. Just then the sound of footsteps on the drive brought Elsie into the passage. "Here they are, Gumbo," she said, "and no dinner for them. Wag your tail, Gumbo; you know Nat."

Gumbo knew Nat well enough, but the footsteps were not his—he was not near. It was Caroline who was coming up the drive; the Wyndhams' gardener, with whom she had kept company half a score of years, was behind her.

A second look into those faces turned Elsie's righteous anger aside and slew it dead. Caroline came into the hall; taking her "young lady" by the arm, she drew her back out of the sunshine.

"There has been an accident, Miss Elsie," she said, trying to be calm, but with that odd tension round her white mouth which speaks of "accident," and the anguish of that pregnant

word. "Another trouble for us all, my dear, my dear."

Elsie remembered that sick qualm of terror, it had come again, she had felt it before; she turned very cold, and put her hand out against the wall, it seemed to be so near her.

"What is it? What has happened?"

She looked at the man; he would speak out, he would have no foolish way of speaking half a truth to break the fall of the full truth on her ears.

"The boat turned over, miss," he said, looking on the ground, "as it come'd along by Seven-Acre Meadow. They are all out of the water, miss. Half an hour back they fetched the doctor and the rector; there are scores of people down there. Mrs. Hacket was out directly and took no hurt, but the cramp struck the Major, and hadn't it been for Mr. Nat it would have gone hard with him—he's come-to."

"Agnes," she said. "You don't mean Agnes. Agnes was not there. You must mean Celia."

"Miss Agnes was there," Caroline said. "She jumped up in the boat, and it wasn't safe, it

wasn't safe, and she overset it, Jim heard her say, she——"

"I'll go," Elsie interrupted. Caroline trembled and wept, there was no cause for weeping. "I'll go and meet them. Let me go."

She turned, but the woman held to her and stopped her.

"Not yet, Miss Elsie, not yet. Oh, my dear, I don't know how to tell you. You knew there is danger on that river. You have heard it scores of times. She was ten minutes in the water, she held to the boat and cried to them to help her, and Mr. Arthur went in, his arm was tired out and he was hot—the water struck too cold, he sank down. She was carried past the Knowle out of sight, she was caught against the willows, a long way down the river, when they found her."

"It's true enough," the man said, "she hasn't spoke yet, the doctor's with her and many more. They are doing all earthly what they can."

And far on into the night, long after hope was gone, they struggled to bring back life into the little frame which was all the pitiless river had left them of Precautia. The spirit had gone, the spirit that they loved, the frail little body was

theirs, but the voice was still; "she had not spoken"---she had been wont to chatter, the man had harped upon her silence—and she would not speak again.

The cries of "Save me!" "Save me!" which rang in the ears of those who had heard them, and would ring on and on through many a day and night, had reached to regions far away, and had been answered, it may be, in a manner more blessed and more merciful than any of which poor humanity has learned to dream.

All through that night they tried to rouse the little sleeper; they would not relax their efforts, nor relinquish hope, they fought for Precautia's life, and yet the sleep was perfect rest and peace from which they tried to awake her.

"All night long till the morning grey,
They watched for one who had passed away."

In the dawn they saw, as the daylight crept from the window to the bed, that the form they held, and kissed, and tried to kindle into life was not Precautia. She was out of reach of their love or of their tears. Her rest had come before she was a-weary; another chair stood empty in their house.

Agnes had been taken home long since. Elsie had only seen her once amongst a group of people, bare-headed, deadly white, dripping wet from head to foot, her eyes wild with pain and fear, but tear-less amongst the many weeping women. Neither had Arthur come, but his father had been with them and with their mother, he had hardly left the house at all.

He had sat with Mrs. Trevor, speaking comforting words to her, and telling her that her son was a son of whom she might think proud things, —telling her how Nat had saved his son's life that day, and had driven away death from the house of his neighbour; telling her of the land where pain and weeping are no more, the far-off land that her little child had reached.

Mrs. Trevor lay and listened, and was comforted; death, the ever-floating cloud, was to her no hated destroyer, no relentless scourge, but the calm solace of her life. For death is double faced, who smiles a true friend, or frowns a bitter foe. Was life a boon to her? She lay, weeping for her youngest born, but not "as they who have no hope."

Poor little Celia! she had fought for her life,

death seemed no friend to her. She had been laughing as the water closed above her head. Agnes had overturned the boat, but Agnes was safe; Arthur had her in his arms, he swam with her to safety, she struggled up the bank. Celia clung to the boat, it floated, bottom upwards, down the stream; ah, but it heaved, and rocked, and lurched under her grasp.

"Save me, Arthur!" she shrieked. "I can't hold on, Arthur, save me! I am slipping!"

He called back that "he would save her," and struck out, swimming fast towards her. He was close to her, she stretched out her arms to clutch at him—and clutched nothing,—the stifling, blinding water drove her down, down; she struggled with it, wrestling, fighting, panting.—Ah, she could breathe, she felt the saving air blow on her, the raindrops pattered on her face, she saw the sun break from behind the cloud,—that was the cuckoo,—the lambs were bleating, the sound of many waters murmured in her ears; but she was alone, left alone, there was no one near, no Arthur, no one. Must she die alone? Again she shrieked. Oh, God,—a hand from the beautiful sky would come and help her. "Help, help!"—she was

sinking. Again the dreadful water drove her down, choking, smothered, beating with her poor hands, down—down. She felt the stones beneath her feet. Again she rose—she was blind now, she could not see, not the sunshine, not Arthur, no hand from heaven; she was blind—and the water roared like thunder in her ears. The great beating of her heart broke something in her breast, she was quiet then; motionless,—she could not fight for life; she sank gently; the murmuring of water was like her mother's voice calling, "Celia, Celia."

They found her stranded against a willow, which overhung the stream, where the current was not strong, nor the river deep. The water rippled over her, it rocked her to and fro, it washed her cloudy hair across her face. She let it have its way and play with her, she was lulled and at peace, her little hands hung down, she never raised them to clutch at the branch within their reach. She would not startle the singing birds again with those wild prayers, "Help me!" "Save me!"

Though her brother wailed, "Celia, Celia. Oh, Celia," his voice was no trump to wake the dead.

Precautia's busy feet would not patter through the house, her lively voice would not be heard again; the playthings and the books, the shabby frocks and the worn shoes, would wait their owner, and would be always waiting.

Gumbo did not understand this; he wandered constantly from room to room, from garden to road, from yard to stable, listening, with pricked ears, for the footstep which would fall no more. Gumbo knew that the figure in the darkened room was not his restless mistress. He had gone there and looked upon her,—upon the indifferent child, on whose face a faint smile lurked which did not widen nor change; the strange child, who did not touch the flowers scattered upon her white frock; the quiet child, whose waxen hands were meekly folded upon her breast—Precautia's busy fingers had throbbed with life, he knew the warmth of their caressing touch so well, but these fingers were cold, they did not find their way to his rough head.

This child, though her cloudy hair and her little frame were so like Celia's, yet was a stranger in the house. Gumbo searched on, pattering to and fro.

"For mercy's sake, take that dog away, Jim," Caroline cried; "he's never quiet, he knows there's something happened, and he upsets us all. Miss Elsie breaks down every time she sees him; he's got the feelings of a Christian, but not the understanding. There, lie down, Gumbo, lie down, I say; there, lie down, you bring mud in all over the house. She's gone *to church,* Gumbo,—that is what I used to tell him, Jim, on Sundays. He knows,—look at 'un. *She's gone to church,* Gumbo."

And when, for the last time, his little mistress went, with pomp and many people, when they carried her to church, they found old Gumbo standing by the porch. They had not missed him in the house, but he had stood in the rain and wind all night waiting; he was stiff and tired, but he wagged his tail, for friends were coming, and in the crowd of people he might find what he sought.

"She had gone to church."

How often she had gone, and had returned to his boisterous welcome; this time she kept him waiting. The men drove him gently from the porch, his friends passed in up the dim aisle

whither he might not follow; he lay down on the drenched ground, he ached, for he was old to keep hungry vigil, and watched. Strangers flocked over the grass; there was the sound of music, they were weeping human tears, unknown to him, out there upon the grass; a steady voice spoke softly, but all the rest were very still.

Then the people went; his friends lingered last, but they too went. Everyone had gone, but she had not come; he waited for her. The daylight lasted a long while. As the shades fell, he rose; very tired he was, he could hardly creep across to that patch of white flowers which looked like a sheet spread on the turf. This was the spot where his friends had stood, this was where they had knelt so long in silence; this might be the church whither Precautia had gone. He crawled over upon the flowers and lay down. He wanted ease for his aching limbs, but the flowers were wet, drenched with the pouring rain, there was no ease for him while he waited.

All night long the rain fell, but with the day it ceased, and the sun shone out. Early in the morning Nat came out of the Hillsden gate, his scarlet coat gay in the sunshine. There were

fresh tears on his face and freshly-gathered flowers in his hands; he was going away presently, and he came for his farewell to the place.

There, stretched upon the funeral flowers, with his head on his paws, lay Gumbo. Poor old Gumbo, he knew nothing of human tears, he had no understanding; he was old, very old, he had been neglected in the house of mourning. His biscuits had been untouched; he had gone hungry, now he was cold and wet; he had died—like a dog—in the night, watching and waiting and wondering, suffering upon a bed, a hard, wet bed of flowers.

CHAPTER IX.

"Men will forget what we suffer, and not what we do."

Six weeks of the daily round, the common task passes away like the morning dew, but the six weeks which had rooted the daisies on Celia's grave, and had staunched the first overflow of tears at Hillsden, had grated by like a century of hard time.

Major Wyndham had paid for the mental and physical shock which he had undergone by a return of fever; he had been ill and still looked ill; he had gone away for a while, but had lately returned, with his sister, Lady Lely, to the rectory.

Untoward circumstances conspired to destroy Mr. Hacket's enjoyment of life. He had been shocked and sorry enough at the poor child's death, he had not blamed Agnes, he had said nothing, comparatively nothing, at the loss of the rings, he had not alluded to the expense which

the recovery of some of those jewels had cost him, but he could not quite forget her carelessness; she was his wife, therefore it was inevitable that he should—occasionally—be bitter against her. The temptation to which the marriage service, in all its frankness, candidly alludes, assailed him. Most certainly he obeyed the injunction, "Husbands, love your wives;" but the other demand, "Be not bitter against them," was too hard for him just now. For Agnes was selfish in her sorrow, she refused to be comforted; she did not break down overmuch, nor give way to outbursts of grief, but she drew away from her fellows. She looked ill, and said, "there was nothing the matter;" she looked unhappy, and "declared she was well enough." She was depressed, and he felt the depression; thick-skinned, unobservant as he was, he loved her so well—for was she not his own?—that her dejection infected him. Hers was natural feeling, no doubt, but the indulgence of it was hard on her husband. Mr. Hacket's flesh was irritated by the pricking of a thorn; he, who had no cares of his own, was overshadowed by the sorrows of his relations-in-the-law; he, who had known nothing of thorns, was yet worried

at his time of life by the presence of the unseasonable intruder. He left it for a while imbedded where it was, but there came a time when he could bear with it no longer, between his soft but powerful finger and thumb he plucked it out and threw it from him.

In other words, he explained to Agnes that he was made wretched by her altered manner, that she had forgotten that some consideration was owing to the living who loved her, that the Dorfold churchyard did not contain the whole world, that his home was no home at all when she was absent from his side, that his dinner was an abomination when she ate nothing and showed no interest in the conversation which, for her sake, he laboured to maintain. That she was deliberately injuring her health, that she must rouse herself, that her feelings were natural, but they had flowed unchecked too long, their passage must be dammed. He had grieved for her sorrow, but he did not want to suffer for her want of control.

They were driving in the brougham as he said all this; she listened, answering nothing. Through her thick veil little but the outline of

her face was visible to him; her soft lips were drawn in as though already she bent to his wishes, and put restraint upon her "natural feeling."

This was a hopeful sign; he should have spoken out long ago, he had been too considerate for her feelings, it was wholesome to be braced. He talked on, dilating on his dumb endurance; now the thorn was out, it was some satisfaction to harp on the pain it had caused. He glorified the majestic beauty of resignation, he re-canonized the virtue of patience, his mellow voice was pleasant in his ears.

Seldom can the preacher note the effect of his sermon upon his congregation, but Mr. Hacket was a sentient sign-post who saw the wayfarer turn in the direction which he indicated; for, on their homeward drive, the brougham was not stopped, though in the basket at Agnes' feet were a bunch of flowers which she had picked to put upon the grave.

Agnes did not pay her daily visit to the churchyard; she, though she was not quite successful yet awhile, saw the reasonableness of her

husband's words, and meant to conform to his wishes. She talked, too, presently: talked on the topics which he found of interest, staring at the lovely country, in its summer clothing, as though she saw small beauty in it. However, she watched it, and that was well; whether she appreciated it, who could tell?

He did not see that she left the flowers in the carriage when they reached home, nor did he see her go out into the yard to fetch them presently, and carry them to her own room and put them into water—slowly, carefully, as though she cared nothing for them, but knew it was right that they should not die untended,—he knew nothing of her, for, with an easy feeling of good times that were coming, he dozed in his library over the *Times*.

She sat by the open window, sewing. The full light streamed upon her, upon the crape, which, in old-fashioned profusion, rustled on the heavy silk dress which she wore; upon the extreme youthfulness of her face; upon the milk-white hands which hurried at their work, so that the click of the flying needle was irregular. She strained at her thread, it snapped in two. She

was nervous, the opening of the door had made her start; the servant came into the room.

"Major Wyndham is here, m'm. I told him that you saw no one, but I was to ask if you'd see him."

"I see no one, Haynes."

This was Agnes' new manner, upon which the servants and the poor people commented. According to the simple creed of Haynes' class, when a neighbour, calling, expressed a wish to see a friend, it was scant courtesy to turn such a one from the door. Her severe face reproved her mistress, for Haynes had barely reached the hall when Agnes called her back.

"I will see Major Wyndham; you can tell him so."

It was not the first time she had met him during these long weeks, but it was the first time she had seen him alone. Did he remember? She hardly knew what she had said, what wild words she had used in terror. Had he even heard her cry? Surely not! for he had not turned his head but had gone on—gone on—and sunk close to the floating boat, close to Celia. He had heard nothing, he had seen nothing; he

came in now as he had always come — unrestrained, easy,—a friend, a friend who should come, and come, and come for ever.

"No other's voice is soft to me
Unless it nameth him."

Such a friend as this should comfort her. Was she to have no comfort in her life? Other people were unhappy sometimes, but they were comforted. He talked to her, and she sat with the sewing on her knee and listened. She had been agitated, visibly agitated beyond control, when he came in, now she was calm. She talked to him openly; it did not seem to strike her that she had been the cause of the calamity, that she had overturned the boat; but she told him how the scene haunted her.

How she could not close her eyes for fear of drowsiness, when waking dreams came to distract her; for, as soon as the abandonment of sleep approached, she felt the motion of the boat and smelt the cowslips, she felt the water washing round her hand, she felt the ring slip from her finger, she started up to clutch it, she felt the tepid water close over her head, she heard those cries, and then——

"Then I see you, Arthur, your head sinking down, the water over your mouth. I feel just as I felt; it is so horrible. I shake myself awake."

It did her good to talk over her fears; they were no fears while he, as he suggested, was high and dry within a foot of her—and yet he winced to hear of them; she looked thin and fragile, she could not afford to play with sleeplessness, she could afford but little call upon her strength.

"Now I have seen you again and told you all about it, I shan't be frightened, I shall shake it off; when you were ill, and I did not see you, then I saw 'it' always, always, in the day-time too."

"A shock like that must upset the nerves."

He spoke absently, she thought, even a little constrainedly.

"Have you seen Elsie?"

It was of Elsie whom she must speak; she was forgetting of whom he thought most.

In one respect, Mr. Hacket considered that Agnes had behaved discreetly since the bereavement; she had not found it necessary to be al-

ways at Hillsden, she had stayed at the Oaks. Her brothers had come home for a time; Max had joined them; her own home was re-peopled, and yet Agnes had seemed to prefer being alone, —she had chosen solitude.

The Trevor lads had long returned to their posts, but Max stayed on at Hillsden; he did not suggest leaving though the house was sad, a house of mourning. Elsie had looked for her sister, but she had not come to her; she had watched for Agnes, but she had watched in vain. Max had been there, she had turned to him. Agnes' grief lay too deep to rise to the surface, it was too fresh a wound to bear a touch, she shrank away to endure her hurt alone, she had failed Elsie?—No, not that—not that—but Agnes had changed a little; she hid her grief, and Elsie's would not be hidden. And Max was there; he understood, he let her talk, he encouraged her to dwell in thought and speech upon Precautia, who had been his sister, too; he was tender with and patient of her grief. Elsie ceased wondering why Agnes held aloof, for she had constant companionship, inexhaustible sympathy, she wanted little else.

"Have you seen Elsie?" Agnes had asked.

"Yes. I was at Hillsden this morning. Lucy was with me."

"How much longer will Lady Lely stay with you?"

"She will be here another week."

"She is very much altered."

"That is what she said of you."

Agnes looked up.

"Have I altered?" quickly, her pathetic eyes raised to his.

"She has not seen you since you were a child."

"I know, but," still staring hard at him, "I *have* altered. I—I feel it—very—often."

"We all change, Mrs. Hacket, unfortunately,—or, fortunately, according to personal taste. Lucy didn't know Elsie. She had to be introduced."

"Elsie—is beautiful."

"Yes, and eighteen is a trying age, Lucy says; she will improve. We found her sitting on the grass, Max was weeding the walk beside her, he is giving that stupendous brain of his a holiday."

"Were you there all the morning? Did you stay long?"

"As long,—no, longer than they wanted us, I am afraid."

She knitted her brow, she was puzzled.

"How did Elsie look?"

"Much as usual."

"She is pale, Arthur, last week I was anxious about her, she ought to—to rest."

"Then what ought you to do? She is as strong as an oak, and you look as though a puff from a bellows would blow you out of—reach. Yesterday you looked worn out, and to-day you did not go at all."

She murmured, "No, Mortimer says I go too often—every day."

"Sometimes," carelessly, "I see you pass, my window looks that way."

"I am glad Max is at home."

"Why are you glad?"

"She has a companion."

"Don't you," speaking very slowly, "don't you know that she has more than a *companion?*"

"What do you mean?"

"Don't you know that she has a lover, a favoured lover? That is what I mean."

He spoke quietly, he spoke calmly, clearly

thus of Elsie, he spoke like this of *Elsie's lover?*

"'Lover' is an out-of-date word; don't you understand it, Mrs. Hacket? I meant that Max is as great a fool about Elsie as Elsie is about him."

His words seemed rough in her ears, but his voice was gentle; startled, confused, confounded, her eyes sank to the ground. He went on talking.

"Elsie will be the one lucky woman in the century who marries her first love. Don't shake your head. The boy possesses something more marriageable than his brains and his smart name now, Mrs. Hacket. He has a story-book,—a stage, a devoted uncle. Lucy knows him and all about it; Colonel St. Maur is a scientific old man, Max suits him to a T. It is no secret that Max is to have the money, a considerable amount (even halving the sum Lucy named) some day, and a home with him while he lives. The course of true love will run smooth."

It was so like Arthur to put everything comfortably for the ears of the hearer; it was like him (though she had not thought it, shrinking

from his words) to handle the subject prosaically, thus.

She could not take his cue, she was no actress, she never wore a cloak upon her mind for him. She stammered out a broken question in a whisper,

"And you—don't mind?"

Was he hurt? had Elsie hurt him? If he spoke harshly, it was because he had the heart-ache.

After a perceptible pause he answered,

"I—shall go back—to—my—work."

"You go because of—this?"

"I go because it is my duty, Mrs. Hacket; 'duty' is such a large word, such a convenient word for a soldier. Brought into fashion by a considerable pugilist."

"You go because of—this?"

She was persistent as a child, and yet the childlike frankness of her eyes had been washed away—in tears? and yet she must be answered plainly like a woman. Major Wyndham bowed his head.

"Because of this," he repeated, laying his hand for a moment on his breast. Then he

banished his momentary gravity with a laugh; a laugh is a simple method of infusing a joke into any subject.

But Agnes, seeing his face, heard no laugh; her lips twitched, she drummed her fingers on her lap, her head sank forward. These symptoms of distress were quiet and controlled, but agitation is infectious; for a moment Arthur watched her, her drooping figure steeped from head to foot in crape.

"Won't you have Max for your brother?" he asked her, speaking cheerfully, as though he did not treat her distress seriously. "Isn't he good enongh for Elsie?"

"No, no."

"He's a nice young fellow; he doesn't interest me, he never did, but that's my fault, of course, for Elsie likes him. You know the Beast made Beauty happy. Why are you crying? Why should you cry? Why—should she not be happy? it's—it's rather a change to be—happy down here, the pessimists say.—Don't cry."

"How can I help it? For you mind; you think I don't know that you are—in trouble, but I do. I saw. I understood."

"Do you think I have got through so many years all ales and cake, all frisk and frolic, Mrs. Hacket? Do you think I don't know the luxury of a heart-ache? Troubles are pretty thick, real and imaginary; Lucy breaks her heart over her servants, cider is my father's bug-bear. Mine and yours we will keep to ourselves, we will hide them, won't we? Bury them deep, out of sight, at peace, at rest, like Precautia, dear little girl.

"'Twas a green and easy world,
As she took it: room to play
(Though one's hair might get uncurled
At the far end of the day).
What she suffered she shook off,
In the sunshine: what she sinned
She could pray on high enough
To keep safe above the wind."

I was reading that last night, and thinking of her, thinking of the last thing she wrote in the school-room. Elsie gave me the book. I tore out the leaf; that's it, read it. I left her writing it, dear little soul.

'She has seen the mystery hid
Under Egypt's pyramid.' "

He watched Agnes as he talked on at random in his determination to talk, and to talk of Celia

—watched her as she read the cramped hand-writing, as her tears blistered the smudged page of the German exercise-book; but as soon as she had read the words she looked up.

"You will not go," she said; "if you are mistaken, if it is not true, you will not go?"

"I am not mistaken."

"Do not go."

"If I stayed on, and my staying did—harm—would it not be better to be gone?"

"Harm? She would miss you. If you go, she would want you."

"You may trust me, Mrs. Hacket, for a friend."

"Not—if you go."

"For a friend who does those whom he—likes—no harm."

"And," anxiously, "you will not go away?"

"What I do, I will do for the best. Can't you trust me?"

Of course she could trust him; she would have liked a fuller assurance from his lips, but that could not be obtained, for Lady Lely was shown into the room even as he was speaking.

CHAPTER X.

"He is well onward in the way of wisdom who can bear reproof and mend by it."

LADY LELY was an industrious woman; there was nothing either indolent or passive about her. Had she been a shade or two lower in the social scale, her energies would have been safely swallowed up in her own cottage; for the manifold duties of cook, nurse, mother, housemaid, laundress, wife, and housekeeper, which falls in the aggregate on the unhappy shoulders of the labouring man's more labouring wife is toil such as drains all natural proclivities dry in any woman.

Lady Lely busied herself about her neighbours, she thought of them, and she thought for them, too. She liked them to walk her way and to dance—as the saying is—to her pipe. When her father had admitted her to his confidence and unfolded his cherished scheme in her ears, she

had listened, but she had not been pleased. She had had no finger in this pie, therefore its flavour could not be wholly to her mind. That Elsie was pretty no one possessed of eyes could deny; Lady Lely admitted it, but added that she was not her style. Beauty unadorned was all very well, but less beauty artistically adorned better pleased Lady Lely's cultivated taste. She was a good girl, no doubt; and goodness was of matrimonial value; but Arthur, with his reputation, might marry anyone. Lady Lely had several friends, with substantial attractions, who would, either one of them, make him a satisfactory wife.

Yet, because the rector had sought her assistance, she was gratified; and, as her frowns were not likely to block the path of love, she might as well smile on the pair, making believe that these smiles of hers were effective and appreciated.

At any rate, Lady Lely was "in the know," and was an interested looker-on who intended to see the game. She had now been at the rectory three weeks; she had paid her home this preposterously lengthy visit, and she had kept an intelligent outlook on the situation from which she

had drawn her own conclusions. These conclusions had lately assumed a serious aspect, and they had given Lady Lely, who was by no means an over-anxious or over-sensitive person, a wakeful night. She was a clergyman's daughter who had, at least, been brought up "in the way she should go," though her mind since her marriage had widened considerably to keep pace with her experience; for the Lelys were of the world, worldly, and their friends were to match them. In her set—which was a remarkably lively set—Lady Lely bore the character, on which she prided herself, of not only being prudent herself, but of being extremely particular about the prudence of her neighbours. She was worldly-wise with the wisdom relished and approved of by the world,—using that word in its methodistical sense. She was kindly too, and fond of her father, no one in her family should make an irretrievable error; she, Lady Lely, would prevent it. She knew when to speak, and speak she would. She was a fluent speaker, frank, too, with a frankness which did not falter though it treated of subjects which it is customary to handle with extreme delicacy.

When her brother entered his home on the following day, as he passed the drawing-room door which stood ajar, Lady Lely called him by name; he turned round and obeyed her summons.

He found her standing by the window; she did not look at him, she was staring hard with a fixed stare at the flower-beds.

"Do you want me, Lucy?"

"I have wanted you, I have been alone for hours. I have looked for you, I have been to Hillsden, you were not there."

"No, I went to the Hackets."

"How is Agnes?"

"Much as usual."

"How is *Mister* Hacket?"

"I made no enquiries. No doubt he's all right. I don't know that he is apt to ail."

"He is, for a man of his age, remarkably healthy."

Lady Lely turned her back abruptly on the flower-beds and faced Arthur. She was a tall woman, and held herself very straight; her eyes were acute and piercing, she fixed them on her brother's face and kept them there.

"Hacket is no Methusaleh, Lucy; men of his age are often hale."

"He is forty years older than his wife."

"Forty, is he? I had an idea he was more than that."

"That is thirty years too old, Arthur."

"A matter of taste, my dear."

"Nonsense!" though Lady Lely laughed as she spoke, her eyes did not make merry too, but kept watching. "Nonsense! it is no matter of taste, but a matter of expediency. No one doubts why the little girl married him."

"What no one doubts must be true, Lucy."

"Money is not at all a bad thing for which to marry. In her case it has turned out well, she has got every blessèd thing she wants. Of course he is not *quite* a gentleman, but she knew what he was, that is not a surprise sprung upon her; he is very good to her and very fond of her, as is apparent to everyone. They say she hadn't enough to eat at home; no wonder she appreciates the good things of life. She was very lucky to alight on Mr. Hacket."

"The whole family of Trevors are remarkably lucky."

"Is that irony, Arthur? No, no, this death was very sad indeed. There are things worse than death; disgrace is worse, and so," laughing again, "is poverty. Poverty is such a hateful thing, and she has escaped poverty. I call Agnes Trevor a lucky girl; and she has improved, she is pretty in a die-away style, those soft martyr-like ways of hers are ingratiating."

"I don't know what you mean by martyr-like."

"Serenely resigned, I mean. We are most of us martyrs, we women, Arthur; we all bewail something. It's dull to be content, it is shallow to be content; the woman who is most hugely discontented and makes most fuss about it is impressive and revered; but serene resignation is more taking to your sex. Agnes is a martyr. She married cautiously, without sentiment. She has her little comforts, her gowns, her everything for which she struck her bargain—no doubt she mourns for sentiment. She might have married a fascinating pauper—they are common as black-berries—but fascination overlaid with bills and sacrifices gets smothered, sentiment cools (it has been known to cool), and Agnes might have

found herself sighing for Mr. Mortimer Hacket, comfort, and kindness. She is the sort of person whom sighing suits, who thrives on martyrdom. Don't go, Arthur, I want to talk to you."

"My dear, you have been talking. I have listened and learned; but now I want to smoke."

"Then come out on the terrace, it is a lovely evening. I want a turn."

"I don't, I am lazy. I want an arm-chair and my pipe."

"Arthur, you are a slave to your pipe; you should be slave to a better thing. You should marry."

"Why? Must I serve *two* masters? You have no pity on your kith and kin."

"Arthur, be serious. Marry, it is your duty to marry; we all wish you to marry. You are good at 'duty,' if at nothing else, so you tell us. *Marry,* my dear boy."

"Everyone says I am going to marry my little neighbour here—everyone but she, herself, says so."

"I heard the rumour. I thought it true at first."

"Don't you think it true now?"

"No."

"You see that I haven't a chance. You see that shock-headed Peter is my victorious rival. Shall I shoot him and carry off the lady?"

"He is a dreadfully uninteresting person."

Lady Lely's searching eyes could find nothing constrained in her brother's manner; he was easy and genial, he refused to read between the lines or to respond to her earnestness of mind. She would not be baulked of her duty, she knew what she was about, she was on the right road, she would reach her goal and strip out the ugly truth from its concealing trappings and show it him as it was, not as it seemed.

"He is a lucky chap."

"You don't envy him?"

"Lucy, why may I not dissemble my broken heart? Do you call this *talking?* It is uncommonly like a lecture."

Lady Lely began to pace up and down the room, the rustle of her skirts was irritable, she was even a little flushed, and her eyes shone.

"Arthur, do you remember the days when you were a naughty boy, when I used to scold you?"

"I even recollect the days when you tweaked my hair and pinched me, Lucy."

"I am going to do it again."

"I shouldn't attempt it. I have grown since then. I am a couple of inches taller than your ladyship."

"Arthur, come up to town with me to-morrow."

"You invited me last week. I told you of my difficulties. I love Dorfold, and I loathe London."

"These tastes are new."

"Strong as new wine."

"Let me tell you a story, Arthur."

"With no moral, Lucy."

"Yes, with a moral; the only truth of the story is the moral."

"Don't you think I know the story and the moral?"

"Hear it again. I can tell the version told you in your youth, the version which you have forgotten, but which was, after all, the practical, the wise,—I had almost said the true story."

"I have a long memory, my dear; I remember—everything—as you remember it. It's

just upon dinner-time, I cannot wait and listen to the twice telling now. Many things are best untold, Lucy."

"Yes, as there are things best unthought, undone."

"Unthink anything unpleasant."

"Won't you listen to me?"

"No, I have listened, you are enigmatical—a little obscure."

"I am ready to speak plainly—for your sake and—for hers."

He was on his way from the room, but he turned round and faced her; they were not a foot apart, there was some power about him which silenced her.

"Hush, Lucy, that is enough. You have tweaked and pinched, you have done your part, you can do no more."

He had gone, she had been weak enough to let him go, her misgivings grew apace. She did not understand her brother, but she concluded he was no better and no worse than his fellows, though he had fads, enthusiasms, and sentiments unshared by that type of mankind with which she was most familiar.

It would have eased her mind to have spoken out her views of his business; he would not brook her interference, she told herself that he had glared dangerously at her as soon as she had alluded to that "silly little woman." Of course he had meant nothing at first. Anglo-Indian fashion, he had elected to form a friendship with a married woman, but he had not chosen an old campaigner for his comrade, with whom he might have played harmlessly at his game. But with Agnes it was different, "it was a game which"—emphatically—"she did *not understand.*"

Amongst Lady Lely's acquaintance were many women who whiled away superfluous time in such recreative friendships and took no special harm, who even loved (discreetly) and who mourned (discreetly) when the lover rode away. And loved again and mourned again, and loved again and mourned again with crows'-feet and with wrinkles, the play killed the time,—they called their pastime "living," and the "love" they cultivated "life." Why had not Arthur chosen a "play-fellow" from these ranks? There was plenty of choice for him, the genus is not rare.

Lady Lely did not like Arthur's method of

receiving her tweaks and pinches. Throughout her lengthy visit to the rectory he had allowed her no glance below the surface of his mood, and the mood had been one of level light-heartedness, in which she did not altogether believe. Fever, ague, neuralgia, and "an attraction" in a dead-alive county, are not helps to a level light-heartedness in any man. Had Arthur not felt deeply, he would not have been on his guard; deep feeling is dangerous.

Mr. Wyndham's credulity was pretty but tiresome, and of course the sister threw dust into some eyes,—the girl, Elsie herself, was to blame. How could she be so dense, so blind, so self-absorbed and selfish as to weed walks with an uninteresting person, when it was her business to be "weeding" elsewhere? How could she waste all her energies in sorrowing after a sister who was out of reach, when the sister near at hand was descending a path which led downhill to a grave over which no flowers could be hung? There were deaths, over which sneers, not sympathy, were offered the bereaved. No such grave should be dug at Dorfold,—it was a blessing for the community that Lady Lely was on the spot.

If Agnes would not listen to her, Agnes should listen to her sister. Elsie was eighteen, —a reasonable age; she was a sensible girl, who had been schooled into sense by a series of events; she would do as Lady Lely told her to do, she would say what she was told to say, once her eyes were opened.

From one point of view, opening the eyes of the blind is an unhallowed proceeding; Lady Lely did not quite fancy her self-imposed task, but, for Arthur's sake, she must do it. Sooner or later the eyes must see; a simpleton has an untroubled life, but is a nuisance to his wiser neighbours. Lady Lely might have gone herself to the fountain-head; she might have carried her clear pitcher of cold water to Agnes, and awakened her roughly, with a drenching, but such a visit meant a scene, a commotion, an awkward memory, if it meant no worse. Besides, Agnes was the sort of woman who would listen to a story with a moral if told to her; the sisters were unusually attached, such a story told in such a manner as Elsie would tell it, must have a wholesome effect,— it was impossible, gauging Agnes' character so far as the schemer knew it, to doubt of its salutary effect.

Poor Elsie.—Well, we were given eyes to see, it was time she learned to use those deep blue eyes of hers to some purpose. She might be a little staggered for a moment by the panorama that Lady Lely would show her. She had hitherto existed in a fool's paradise of milk and water, but "our evil or our careless actions incur debts every day that humanity, sooner or later, must discharge;" to this rule of life Elsie must conform, she must pay her mite towards her sister's debt.

It was not so long since Lady Lely's girlhood that she had quite forgotten its foolish, innocent dreams; it was not so long since her soul had been spotted with the world, that she had altogether forgotten what the knowledge of these blemishes might cost Elsie. She was sorry; but sorrow, in her case, "was enough," to-morrow she would go to Hillsden, to-morrow she would make her explanations, to-morrow there should be no playing at cross-purposes, and to-morrow Arthur should find that her story, with a moral, had been told, that though she did not argue she could act.

Now that Lady Lely's plan was laid, her mind

made up, she was comparatively at ease, and she could, without an effort, be pleasant and chatty at dinner. She told many tales—but none with morals—she was unconstrained and affectionate, she was particularly "nice" to Arthur, never had she been more genial and caressing. The rector sighed as he kissed her good-night.

"We have had a delightful evening, Lucy,—delightful. I wish you could stay on a little longer."

"I have over-stayed my leave, papa."

"Arthur has been so well since you came. Ah, my dear," looking meaningly, suggestively at her, "the house is a different thing with a woman in it."

"You hear what papa says, Arthur,—when will you make him happy? When will you take his hint?"

"'A woman' is so vague, father, if it isn't the right woman the innovation might not be an improvement."

"You know the right sort, you are such a procrastinating fellow, bring her here."

Mr. Wyndham's voice was earnestness itself,

but his companions laughed as though he had been joking.

"I want him to come back with me. I know the very thing for him. I could manage it all, he should have no trouble, but he won't come."

"Not just now, Lucy. On my way out I'm coming to you."

"Your way where?"

"To the Far East."

As Arthur walked away, Mr. Wyndham looked at his daughter anxiously.

"There," he said, "there, that is the way he has spoken two or three times lately. He doesn't mean it,—eh, Lucy?"

"I think," slowly, impressively, and in a whisper, "I think I should let him mean it. I should let him go. It would, perhaps, be better for him and happier for him that he should go."

All the genial lines faded out of the rector's face as though they had never been; he stared, almost angry in his surprise and disappointment, at Lady Lely.

"You have done no good?"

"None."

"You don't think there is any chance?"

"None."

"I am bewildered, Lucy, and amazed. Lucy, he has behaved badly, with no sense of honour, with no sense of——"

"Hush, papa, you do not understand.—I think, no,—I am sure that Elsie will marry young St. Maur."

The rector thought over these words a full minute, while his daughter watched him with her hand on his arm; when he lifted his eyes they were wet.

"Poor fellow," he murmured, "poor boy. I understand, I see it all clearly now; he shall go, he must go, he had better go. Poor Arthur—now—I understand."

Lady Lely told herself as she walked upstairs that all was going well, and that her father, to his dying day, "should never understand."

CHAPTER XI.

Know when to speak—for many times it brings
Danger, to give the best advice to kings.

HERRICK.

MAX was late for breakfast, but Elsie did not think it necessary to treat him with ceremony

and postpone her own meal till his arrival. She had finished her toast and tea, and was sitting on the window-seat when he came down.

He was not famishing for food but for companionship this morning; he seated himself on the window-seat by Elsie's side, as though breakfast was not worth serious consideration.

"You are late, Max, it is nearly nine o'clock."

"I have been for a walk. I couldn't sleep, so I got up and went out."

"Then do get your breakfast, you must be starving."

Her word was law; he poured out his tea, dug his egg out of the breakfast-cup of hot water, where it had been placed for warmth, pattered round the table after his requirements in silence, —once upon a time no pattering would have been necessary.

Elsie had many morning duties awaiting her, but she stayed idly where she was. There lay upon the table a black-edged envelope addressed to Maxwell St. Maur, Esq. upon this her pensive eyes were fixed. She mistrusted the contents of that letter, until the news it brought was told to her she had no energy for duty and nothing to say.

Max made an indifferent breakfast and he made it leisurely; when he had finished he lit his pipe, and still the black-edged envelope lay untouched.

"Max, when I get a letter, *I* open it."

"When I get one of your letters, *I* open it."

Here was another of those things which he had taken to saying the last day or two. His eyeglass was firmly screwed into his eye, he had reseated himself upon the window-seat, two dimples flickered for a moment into the hearer's cheeks, and he saw them there.

"If you open them, that is about all you do."

"What do you mean?"

"You don't read them, at least you never used to answer any questions which I asked you."

"When I was a boy," he said, "I was a fool. The last letter you wrote to me I read a hundred times."

"You have often told me my letters were full of nothing but commas, questions, and superfluous consonants. Was the last one so interesting?"

"Three hurried lines — but it was yours, Elsie."

She rose, and fetching the black-edged envelope she put it in his hand.

"Open it, Max."

"I am afraid of it."

"Why?"

"It may bring me bad news, it is probably a summons to town."

"Don't you want to go?"

"No—I can't bear to leave you,—that's the fact."

Here was her dread, the precise fear she had felt shared by him, a care shared is a care halved; no, because he shared the trouble it was a trouble no longer.

"You have stayed so long," she said, gently, to cheer him. "You have been very good to me, you have helped me, now I must, I can try to help myself. Sooner or later you will be obliged to go. That is how you used to comfort me, Max, when I was a little girl and packed for you, and cried as I packed because you were going back to school."

"That was a very long while ago," said the young man moodily, "we have changed since then."

"I have not changed," lifting her blue eyes to his ugly face.

"Not changed," he repeated, with a tragic gesture,—looking into her face and then dropping his eyeglass as he was accustomed to do when much moved by emotion. "Not changed? Then I don't know what the word changed means."

"I have grown up," a little hurt at his vehemence. "I don't get angry, because I can't when I am sad, and I could not argue with you now, Max, because we always think the same about every little thing—haven't you noticed it? But I have not changed, I could not change. I'm like the weather-cock on the stables jammed down by rough weather and fixed fast. I only creak in the wind, I can't veer round."

He looked upon the weather-cock to which she likened herself and sighed; then he tore open his letter, which, when he had read, he tossed upon the floor.

"Does he want you, Max?"

"Yes, Professor Fogo—stupid old fool!—is to be there next week, and I'm to come and meet him. There are a hundred and forty thousand things for me to do and to see to."

To hear Max growling and snarling at the great professor, over whose books he pored, was "very new," indeed. Change, at which he sighed, was busy with him, too.

"But, Max, Colonel St. Maur is fond of you, he has done and will do so much; of course he wants you to be with him now that he is alone. Professor Fogo sounds—sounds interesting; surely you will like to get back to your work."

"Do you remember what you told me long ago? Do you remember that you said I was of no use to anyone, that I crammed my head with odds and ends of uselessness, that I cared for no one and missed everything? All true, Elsie, all true, except one part of the prophecy."

He spoke with such bitterness that Elsie laid her hand soothingly on his.

"Those were the sort of stories I told when I was angry, Max."

"You foretold that I should miss everything; it was no story, it was true, you were right. I have missed—everything."

"You are morbid, Max. Are you going to make me argue when you hate it? What have you missed? Nothing. You have got much more

than you dreamed. Think of Colonel St. Maur, of the books, the leisure, the money. You are the luckiest boy in the whole world."

"You don't understand," he said, holding her hand. "Come out," for she began to tell him of her duties and her lack of time, "come out into the garden, come out for a turn in the sun, it is such a perfect day; soon I shall be back in smoke, and dirt, and noise; don't grudge me an hour, Elsie."

The sun had not dried all the dew on the long grass, the lawn was wet, but the boy and girl, linked arm in arm, were indifferent to that fact; the turf was soft to their wandering feet, the fresh air blew about them, the sun shone warm on their bare heads. She was conscious only of the sunshine, the fragrance, the fulness of the happy morning, he was desperately miserable. Elsie had been, in past times,—he confessed as much in saner moments,—both a nuisance and a superfluous possession, yet she had been wholly his, humbly his. Now that nothing in the wide world was worth possessing save she shared it, now that he "looked in her eyes and saw" her as she was, then at this supreme moment he

found that another man had annexed his property, and that the desire of his eyes was no longer his. Max was jealous, and Max had fallen in love. He did not enjoy the beauty of the morning; the corner of the rectory, which might be seen from the Hillsden flower-garden, was out of range of his vision, but, in his mind's eye, these bricks and mortar blocked all other sights.

Elsie should never guess what suffering she caused him; the suffering itself was some satisfaction—did it not flow from the divine source of Max's angel? If she would be a little less confiding and sisterly he could have borne it better.

Of what use was his scholarship? Would any girl give a fig for mental developments? In the blissful days when Elsie had been his, though she had revelled in his success she had done her best to block the road which led him thither—his books were her foes, his time her property. He was ready, at this crisis of feeling, to make a bonfire of his library, and learn nothing on earth but the flute.

His enemy had valour, a flat back, immaculate boots, a sleek head, irreproachable collars—

how could he hope to better these enormous advantages, he who was so little worthy, body or soul, of the lady who paced the lawn arm in arm with him, and who turned to look into his ugly face when he sighed?

"What is the matter, Max?"

"My pipe has gone out."

"Doesn't it draw, or were you absent? Arthur always lets his pipe out."

At this name Max flushed, as freckled, red-haired faces flush, from brow to chin,—a beetroot flush.

"Elsie,"—he was not going to reveal his secret, only turn the sod and take a peep at it in her company,—"Elsie, how much longer is this going on? When are you going,"—he was as hoarse as a raven, and paused to clear his rough throat,—"when are you going to be married? When is it going to be announced? How much longer is Wyndham to wait for you?"

The hold she had upon the speaker's arm—she had leaned upon him—grew very light; she looked aside.

"Till Doomsday—if he waits for me," she remarked; her rich voice was low and soft. Why

did his thumping heart croak unmusically in his throat when he spoke?

"But—you like him?"

"Very much."

"When are you going to—to——"

"I am not going 'to—to' at all."

Her laugh was both mischievous and nervous. Elsie, amongst all those talents of hers, possessed no talent for lying, she was frank as a schoolboy; though Max, with the lover-like capacity for self-torture, imagined that this decision of hers might arise as much from necessity as from choice, yet was encouraged to repossess himself of her hand.

"Elsie, you know——"

"I know nothing. I am the most ignorant friend you have, Max. I can't even say my tables."

"You used to like—*me*, Elsie, and you know—though you don't know your tables—yet you know that, when I thought Wyndham had cut me out, it—it broke my heart—don't shake your head—you let me break my heart over a myth, although you know I love you, dear."

Beauty and the Beast were arm in arm, hand

in hand. Their attitude was eloquent, a very poem to be read in their faces; but Caroline had waited half-an-hour for her mistress to order dinner, and she had waited long enough. She walked out boldly into the sunshine.

"If you please, Miss Elspeth, Mrs. Tade's a-come, and I've had no orders for the dinner."

Ruthlessly she separated them, knowing what she did. Remembering her experiences with her gardener, she told herself there would be lots of time for that sort of thing later on; but to Mrs. Tade time was money, and Miss Elsie was not behaving well, Master Max was no mate for her, and she had no patience with Major Wyndham, that she had not. Elsie was unaware of Caroline's severity; she ordered dinner, and she set about her morning duties in a misty haze of happiness which softened all things to her sight.

Somebody was waiting for her in the sunshine, somebody who fretted for her, her heart was "glad for somebody."

"Alas, my mother
Wept so again: and I—I see her suffer,
Yet cannot keep myself from being happy."

Thus had Thekla spoken to another Max;

thus might Elsie have spoken too. With all her recent sorrow in her mind, while she sat by her mother's side, while she saw Celia's work-basket upon the couch, "yet she could not keep herself from being happy."

Elsie had no idea that she was "in love," she ignored romance and sentiment as she found them in her neighbours. From her babyhood she had singled out Max St. Maur for the particular object of her particular preference. She was an affectionate child, fond of her kith and kin, but for him her affection had been inordinate, its roots were deep, and had grown with her growth.

Why she adored this quiet boy, who took small notice of her, she had not inquired; the feeling was to her natural, inevitable, requiring no explanation. A dog singles out a member of a family for a special friend; it may bestow its faithful, unreasoning, and unreasonable devotion upon an unworthy object, but its choice once fixed never wavers, but abides for good and ill. To Elsie, Max was the centre of the world; the world might be flat and barren in the eyes of others, but she liked it, it satisfied her.

Fate insisted that the hands of an unconscious, hitherto most unappreciative young gentleman should hold her greatest good or deepest ill. And he—his words, his eyes, he, as he had been upon this happy morning, had turned the complexion of her preference, her affection, into a new thing.

It was strange to be shy of Max, and yet she loitered on in her mother's room, though that mother had fallen into her morning sleep, and left Elsie free to go whither she listed. She loitered, watching her impatient lover from behind the curtain as he paced to and fro the lawn awaiting her. She felt exasperated at her own foolish delay when Caroline opened the door, and, beckoning to her with an important air, said that, "Lady Lely was downstairs."

"I thought she'd gone away," said Elsie hurrying again to the glass; she had smoothed her hair very lately and very often.

Elsie was awed by Lady Lely. Was she ever in earnest? was she laughing in her sleeve at Dorfold and its people? Lady Lely was so smart, and held herself with so magnificent a mien.

Elsie felt like a cock-sparrow beside a royal eagle when the lady talked with her; she did not like the cock-sparrow feeling, and she wished Lady Lely at Jericho.

"She's going by the mid-day express, miss, and has come to say good-bye. I showed her into the drawing-room. You are tidy enough, Miss Elsie, if you haven't got flour on your face and the hair of corpses and convicts frizzled and top-turdled on your head."

Lady Lely greeted Elsie with a kiss. Elsie flushed at the salute, which was unusual. Arthur's taste was extraordinary; most men who lack all things else do not lack eyes to see a beautiful face. Few men would overlook Elsie, as she was this morning, for a wishy-washy, colourless sister. While Lady Lely pondered the marvellous question "of matters of taste," she stared with her hard, brilliant eyes upon Elsie, who blushed and blushed again under her scrutiny, the dimples playing in her cheeks, her curved red lips parted in a half-conscious smile. She was so radiantly fair in her black gingham dress, of excruciating fashion, she was so guileless and so wholesomely fresh in the morning sunshine, that her companion

felt an undefinable respect for the girl, unsophisticated as she was.

"It was kind of you to come and say good-bye."

Lady Lely felt it was extremely kind.

"But I have something more to say than good-bye, my dear. I have something serious to discuss with you."

Elsie, who could "not keep herself from being happy" beside her mother's couch, and in sight of Celia's playthings, was not to be made anxious by Lady Lely's discussions; she saw the shadow of a waiting figure fall across the window, her attention wandered.

"It's a censorious world, Elsie."

"Is it?" smiling.

"Yes, and you know nothing of it, Agnes knows nothing of it. Your poor mother is not strong enough to look after you, to see what is happening, or what is likely to happen."

Lady Lely grew impatient, the girl was such a simpleton, those rippling smiles, hot blushes, shy smiles exasperated her. The task was difficult, Lady Lely wanted to be met half-way, time was passing. Insinuations were impossible, she

must act as her own interpreter and use plain language.

"Simplicity is all very well," she said, sharply, "but you know as well as I know that Agnes married Mr. Hacket because he was a convenient person to marry," she had wiped the sparkle out of her hearer's face at last, "because he asked her to do so, in fact, not because she had any preference for him. No one blames a woman for marrying conveniently."

Elsie tossed up her head, her lips straightened. Lady Lely paused for a reply; there was none.

"She knew what he was when she married him. To do him justice, his virtues and his failings are not concealed. He may be selfish,—show me a man who is not selfish, and your discovery out-soars Columbus."

"He has been good to us;" in a cold measured tone.

"No doubt of it, poor man. I am very angry with Arthur; I have spoken to him, I have entreated him to come to London, but he declines, he means to stay here and play with fire until some one has been badly burnt. Agnes is foolish, but I don't blame her as I blame him, she mayn't

quite understand how dangerous it is for a woman in her position to trifle with—with a very dangerous sort of amusement."

"I don't know what you mean."

But that some knowledge dawned upon the listener was made apparent, her face grew pale.

"I mean that my brother is attracted, fascinated by Agnes, that he dangles after her week after week, and that she encourages and———"

"Hush, Lady Lely."

"No, Elsie, I don't hush till I've helped her. You know nothing of the world, or the ways of the world, as I tell you; but you must learn, it's a place in which one has to live, therefore it's as well to have one's eyes open and one's wits about one. If your sister marries a man for his money, and then finds a man she prefers to her husband, it's nothing new in the annals of humanity, but it's uncomfortable—we must set ourselves about doing what we can to show her that———"

"Hush!"—the young girl's hands were clenched, her head thrown back, her voice was rough and hard,—"I will not listen to you."

"Only a fool and a selfish fool closes her eyes and shuts her ears and covets ignorance, Elsie.

Everyone cannot be blind and deaf; even my maid heard gossip in the village."

"How dare you say such things to me? How dare you even think such things of Agnes? You may know the world, the world you talk about, but you don't know Agnes."

"You are excessively rude, Elsie; that does no good. Do you imagine I enjoy talking of your sister's folly?"

"Her folly—*hers?* You—you dare to come here and say this? I—" drawing in her breath in a sob,—"I could kill you, Lady Lely."

"Don't be ridiculous, my dear; on her account I have come. I quite know that Agnes was by way of being a superior little girl. I tell you all this because I do understand that she is a nice woman, a good woman; it is the good women who do the reckless things—sometimes; they have acquired a fatal habit of thinking first of their—ahem—others, then of themselves. You don't find the women, who are not good, go beyond the pale; they are all in society, they are cautious. When a good woman discovers that she has a weakness, a flaw in her saintship, the dis-

covery is a shock that may make her reckless; recklessness, under many circumstances, is ruin."

Lady Lely's metallic, argumentative voice struck hard on Elsie's burning ears, her eyes never left the speaker's face.

"You forget, with so much knowledge, you forget that Agnes is a—Christian."

Lady Lely smiled; here was an old-time argument, but she knew something of the subject.

"St. Peter was a Christian, my dear. But was he immaculate? I think not. Yes, you are furious with me, it is not unnatural, I make allowances; but your anger, unfortunately, doesn't alter the facts of the case. It does not prevent Arthur from haunting your sister's home, from watching for her, and thinking for her, and living for her. I have to consider him, him and papa, too; if there should be an open scandal," her brilliant eyes shone upon those others which flinched now for the first time, "it would, I have not the least doubt of it, it would kill papa."

Here Lady Lely had hit home. Elsie's lips—they were white and strained—quivered for a moment, her eyes sank down, her head drooped, she put her hand to her collar and pulled it

loose,—she was being prepared for action, Lady Lely thought, and pressed her advantage.

"This is a shock to you, Elsie. Sit down a moment, you look queer. Yes, even the possibility of unpleasant chatter amongst one's neighbours is disagreeable; but the tongues may be easily silenced. I want you to speak to Agnes yourself, a word or two will do it, tell her people are talking, that Arthur would be ruined, that papa would break his heart. If she could see you now, your face would wither her sentiment. Don't look so tragic, Elsie; sit down. As soon as she knows what is the matter, she'll give it up. She's drifted on, not understanding what it meant; such a natural thing, after all, she, who'd hardly ever seen a man in her life, much less a nice one,—she, who has not learnt that no man on earth is worth it—or anything. Sit down, my dear; you are ill."

"Why should I be ill because you talk and deafen me. I am not ill. You have not paused one moment to let me set you right. I hardly heard a word you said, I had to think—to think. I have to tell you of what I never meant to tell—I mean just yet, of course.—There is no other way but that to silence you. You think yourself

so wise, you are so wise, but here you're wrong, wrong,—you thought so much and understood—so little. Arthur will laugh at you. I must, I will tell him what *you* say of—Agnes, even of Agnes.—Arthur has asked *me* to marry him. It is me, me,—do you hear?—*me,* whom you may watch and talk about and gossip over with your maid. It is me whom he loves. Is there harm in that? Is there scandal in that? Must Agnes be warned of that?"

Lady Lely bit her lip, for Elsie hurled her words unpolitely, thick and fast; broken with passion, they tore the listener's ears. This was not the retort courteous, but there could be no doubt the girl spoke the truth. The elder lady stared, and wondered what could it mean? Did this violence imply that she had been hoodwinked, befooled? that Elsie took her tidings hard because she had the greatest possible interest in Major Wyndham? If Elsie was coy and Agnes confidante, then Lucy had made a sad fool of herself. Could the carefully-linked chain of circumstantial evidence be broken by this new light which had been shed upon it? Most assuredly it could. Lady Lely wanted time to think.

"Are you going to marry him?" she inquired, briskly; she was confounded, but time was passing, she had no leisure in which to beat about bushes for the game she sought.

There was no answer to Lady Lely's question; impatiently she repeated it.

"Are you going to marry Arthur?"

A shadow fell across the window, and Elsie again put her hand up to loosen the collar round her throat.

"I do not know," she answered, very low. Lady Lely jumped to a conclusion—Elsie *was* coy, Agnes *was* confidante; she had cracked the nutshell within which the mystery lay hid, and was displeased enough to find her error of judgment corrected.

"You should make up your mind, it isn't fair to keep him waiting. What I said, I said for the best; people have got hold of the wrong end of the stick, and you and Agnes had better know that it is so. Women can't afford to be talked about. I should advise you to say 'yes,' and to say it quickly. No doubt I made a mistake, and no doubt you were angry with me, but I won't quarrel with your displeasure if I've driven you into marrying Arthur. I can't tell you, my dear,

how glad I am to hear the attraction is not Agnes. Give her my love. We shall laugh over this some day. Good-bye, I must fly. I have been here a very long while."

It was a cold cheek which Lady Lely kissed, it was a blank face to which she nodded her farewell. All the dimples, blushes, sparkles banished. Was she jealous? Probably. Poor Arthur! her angel's face and her fiendish temper promised him a bad time.

Lady Lely would keep her own counsel, her brother must have laughed at her in his sleeve; but had she been wrong, altogether wrong? A blunder is easily made, suspicions are quick-growing weeds. Had nothing been evil save Lady Lely's imagination? Had no one been careless save she, herself?

CHAPTER XII.

"She, my white rose, dropping off
The high rose-tree branch?
The night wind blew too rough,
The noon sun burnt too hot."

Lady Lely's duty was done, and she had gone. The tongue is a headstrong member which revolts from due control; Elsie's "farewell" was

barely articulate, but the nervous tremor of her limbs did not prevent her preceding the visitor to the hall-door with decorous courtesy. She watched her out of sight, then she turned away and crept softly into the school-room; no one must follow her, she must be alone, she must not only feel, she must think. Feeling was just then hard to strangle. The sick faintness of her heart was enervating; she struggled to regain her power of thought, it eluded her. Then she sank upon her knees and prayed; she must tell of her pain, she was weak, feeble, she wanted help. She had learnt of "the passionate love which takes thought for the erring and weak." She knew the "pitiful scorn of wrong which the Scriptures everywhere teach." She wanted pity—what had she done? What had she said? She, too, had done evil that good might come, nay,—not wholly evil, for had she not silenced that harsh voice which had dared to speak of Agnes. The tongue is a fire. Elsie was scorched by its flames, she put her burning hands over her eyes. Could the lips who had praised Agnes's girlhood, who had kissed her when she toddled, as a child, amongst them, whisper of her lightly now?

Here, in the village, near at hand, dare these familiar friends, to whom she had been so sweet, so gentle, speak evil of Agnes—of St. Agnes?

Elsie shivered, burning hot though she was, from head to foot. A step, a quick, familiar step trod the passage, approaching her. She shrank back out of sight against the wall, but only for a moment. She recollected she had no right to shrink, or to hide herself, or to change her gladness into grief. For Agnes's sake she must not flinch, nor fear. She uncovered her face and turned it to the light.

When Max came in, she greeted him with a smile.

His dim eyes saw nothing unusual in her smile, nothing wan in her face, nothing beyond its beauty, he was too agitated, himself, to be observant. He came close to her and took her hand; it lay, soft and cold, as a dead bird might lie, in his palm.

"I have been waiting so long, Elsie. I thought that tiresome woman was never going. You are cold. Come out into the sunshine, dear."

"Not now," looking into his tender eyes, but without knowing of their tenderness.

"You are tired, Elsie; come over to the window-seat and rest."

She said "yes;" but she did not move, standing with her hand in his.

"Elsie—dearest—you knew what I meant?"

"Yes," she said again.

"But I meant a thousand, thousand times more than you knew. I was such a stupid young fool before, I did not know what you were; I took it all as a matter of course. You and Agnes—don't go, Elsie,—you and Agnes were my sisters then. Darling, if you will let me live my life with you, then I will show you how I love you; after years and years, then you shall begin to guess what you are to me."

He paused for her answer, her cold hand chilled him.

"I don't hear what you say—you—you mumble so.

He threw his arm protectingly round her; she was bewildered, perhaps, at his passionate words, the boy was a little overwhelmed by the strength of his own feelings.

"Will you let me be your lover, sweet? That's distinct, Elsie. I am your lover; some day may I be your husband, nearer still and dearer? Now, do you understand?"

"Yes, I understand."

"Then answer, Elsie. Whisper, I shall hear."

But she did not whisper, it was doubtful—even to him—if she felt the pressure of his arm or responded in any way to his broken avowals.

"Elsie, you shall have no more worries, no more parings and savings. The sorrows that come we will face them together; we will share everything, even our lives, Elsie. You do like me—you do, don't you? You almost told me so this morning."

"I *said* nothing," her voice was low and firm, she looked into the eyes which were so near to hers. "Max, don't look so glad, don't be like this, there is no reason for it. I must think, I must wait." She strove to speak coherently, rationally, to give an explanation which would satisfy, without hurting him more than must be, that would drive him away and leave her to think, to act alone. "While you talk like this, I

am confused. Don't you remember why you first came to me? Don't you remember Celia? we have had trouble and mother is ill, ill close to us. I cannot forget everything—all in one moment—this is no time, no time to be—happy, Max."

These were not the words for which he was listening, this was not the scene his imagination had forecast. Chilled and disheartened, his eyes clouded with the shadow which fell from hers. He took her at her word; slowly and dejectedly he left her, "whatever she said it would sure be right," the flavour of righteousness was bitter enough in his mouth.

Max must help to discharge the debt upon which Lady Lely had meditated. It is a spreading debt, permeating far and wide. The debtor's nearest and dearest pay most and heaviest, but they do not pay to the uttermost farthing. When shall the debt be fully cancelled? When

"They have gone and ta'en their wages"?

Alas, who knows?

Max went back into the sunshine, the sunshine that was no longer beautiful, but dazzling, for he was alone; alone save for the corner of the rectory which had re-appeared upon his horizon; there it

was, though misty and far off. He sat himself down upon the seat in shade of the laburnum,—the seat from whence Mrs. Trevor had watched the cricket once upon a time,—and tried to school himself to patience by reading. He turned the pages, scanning each word upon them, but all interest had been wiped out of the universe by Elsie's caution. Why should she want to think? were not her feelings sufficient for her? was it not better to feel than to think? He felt so much, that he could not think. This unusual precaution was hard upon him; but the rack was hers, so he stretched himself upon it.

Presently, through the open French window, Elsie came out upon the lawn. He started up, and stood waiting, but she had not seen him; she was strangely preoccupied, surely.

Walking across the grass to Celia's garden, she knelt down and gathered a small bunch of the pink daphné growing there,—gathered the flowers with great care, not dragging at the tough, twig-like stalks, but picking them with slow deliberation, as though she had no thought beyond her nosegay. She never glanced at Max; but, turning round, drew on her gloves and

walked away, down the shrubbery-path, on to the drive. He heard the click of the gate as it closed behind her passing figure.

With a flood of tenderness, he told himself that she was taking those flowers to Celia's grave, that there she would think of him. He threw his book down on the grass at his feet, his eyes grew soft; he was content to wait.

But Elsie, shivering in the sunshine, was walking up the drive which led to her sister's home, her living sister's home. The other sister did not want her now; the tears she had shed, the grief she had not checked, had been but luxuries of woe. For there were human graves where mourners might not mourn, human graves undecked with flowers; and close at hand, hard by, within her reach, such a grave was being wrought for—not for a stranger, far away, of which to hear, of which to read in the newspaper, to read as a tale that is told, and has no being but in the brain of its creator, but for—Agnes.

Tongues raked the soil away, the trench was ready; Lady Lely had said it was so, but Elsie had silenced her. She had spoken, it had been

no falsehood, and yet it had done work for a falsehood. Elsie was truthful, people believed her statements; but now she was ready to trade upon her reputation, and to lie. Had she not been bidden to tell Agnes what had been told to her? That she would never do. Lady Lely had said that recklessness was ruin; would she drive her sister to recklessness? She, who was at this moment reckless herself, knew the horror of it. Yes, Agnes's eyes must be opened, she must be shown the covered grave, but its entrance should be closed, barred, blocked by Elsie—by Elsie herself.

Lady Lely, like many ladies whose gift of speech is extensively cultivated, was not immaculately truthful; the rumours of which she had spoken were inventions, useful enough, but non-existent.

Elsie's memory, now this light had been shed upon it, dealt sternly with her, bringing evidences which seemed most strong foundation for Lady Lely's words, "If a girl marries for money, and later on meets a man she prefers to her husband, though her case may not be unique, it is sufficiently uncomfortable." Light words, but which

touched upon the hearer's ears hot as fire. Even if Lady Lely's world, of which she talked so glibly, were the true world, and not an airless, confined, unsavoury slum in one corner of it, yet Elsie knew that those words had been true, and could not refuse to know it.

Mr. and Mrs. Hacket were both "at home," they were together in the library. Agnes was busy with her weekly accounts, and he stood by her as she wrote and counted. Elsie waited, standing by the window, until the work should be done. She did not look at the burly, complaisant man, but she blushed, a new blush, new like the intolerable faintness at her heart, when he spoke with a mild impatience to his wife. Oh, if she might go away and shut her eyes again for ever, for ever! As though eyes once opened can close. As though they will not stare out, though tired, into the shade until the day dawn and the shadows flee away.

Mr. Hacket was not pleased to see his sister-in-law, uninvited, unexpected as her advent was at this early hour. His manner was not genial, and he prolonged the business of the accounts to its extremest tether. Agnes was patient, yet Elsie

hated the very patience; it was cold, apathetic, a new patience—new, like the rest of life upon this unhappy morning.

She was watching Agnes with distrust, she had been driven to this—to doubts, suspicions, mistrust. Lady Lely had done her irreparable mischief, yet Elsie knew she had been Agnes's friend. At last, at last, the time for watching was over; Mr. Hacket locked away his book, then Agnes, rising, went over to the window, and, joining Elsie, laid her hand upon her arm.

"Come out into the sunshine, Elsie, it is a lovely morning."

This was what Max had said.

"It is hot," she said, "the sun is baking."

"We will go into the shade."

Strange, that no one heard the hoarseness of the young girl's voice. Strange, that no one observed the tension of her face. Stranger yet that Agnes did not feel how the arm shook to which she held. But when the sisters were alone,

"There is something wrong, Elsie; what is it?" Agnes asked. After all, she was not blind —not as yet—to Elsie's welfare.

"I brought you these flowers, they have only just come out; you used to like them."

"You did not come for that," taking the flowers from her hand. "There is something wrong. One of the old storms—the tea-cup storms—which Max detests."

Agnes laughed, the blood rushed to the hearer's cheeks, again the hot and painful flush dyed her face, and Agnes laughed again.

"Is Max in disgrace?"

"I have not come to talk of Max."

"Of whom, then?"

"Of Arthur Wyndham."

A piece of daphné fell upon the ground, and Elsie, stooping, picked it up.

"I don't quite understand what you can have to say of him, he does not share those 'tea-cup storms.' He never quarrels with you."

"Not now—but once we—disagreed."

"How?—in what way?"

"I—I made a mistake."

Agnes looked round into her sister's face; the dove-like eyes were hard; she spoke, not gently this time, but rapidly.

"A mistake. What mistake? Don't let another of us make a mistake."

"I won't," with a sick qualm. "I wont, Agnes. Did you ever guess, did you ever hear, did Arthur ever tell you that he wanted to marry me?"

She got no answer to those three quick questions, unless those fingers closing tightly upon her arm was answer sufficient.

"Do you remember at your dinner-party we went away together?—then it was. He asked me to marry him. At first, when I said no, he would not listen. When I said India was far away, he told me that where he lived would be my home, and far away from nowhere. He said——"

"What is the use of telling me all this?—do you think it right to repeat such things? Do you think I want to hear Major Wyndham's secrets?"

"Wait, you have not heard. He said—what, you won't listen?"

"No," tapping her foot, "not to a word."

Only the throbbing of the hearer's wildly-beating heart made Agnes' voice so faint.

"Every day he has been with me, Agnes. He came full of honour. I think we girls who are impressionable are ready to worship valour,—to

worship a brave soldier, but Arthur would not let us make a hero of him: he was a friend, a friend who thought for me, and of me,—and of Celia, and of us—all. Don't you know that he had changed our lives for us, that he has been a rough-weather friend, Agnes, and a fair-weather companion? Is it possible not to—to like him?"

"If he wants you to marry him, why should you *not* like him? Does any commandment forbid it? Let go my arm, Elsie, you hurt me."

"But I said 'no,' Agnes."

"That was your mistake, easy to make, but I warn you not easy to undo. Why do you rake this up now? Why should you come to me? What am I expected to do? Am I to tell him that you said 'no,' and meant 'yes'? Am I to explain that you have changed your mind? Am I to suggest that he should say such and such things to you?"

"No, no. Don't speak to me like that, Agnes, you have never spoken like that before in your life. I want him to go—don't you understand? I cannot bear to meet him every day."

"You are mad, Elsie; you want him to go; and yet——"

"Hush, dear, I want him to go—because he has—changed. Don't be angry any more, but look at him yourself; think of him as he used to be, and see if he has not altered."

"Do you think he breaks his heart for you? I don't believe it," speaking harshly. "He told me Max was everything in heaven and earth to you. You change like the wind: one day, Max; the next day—Arthur. Don't you think it would be wiser to keep all this sort of thing to yourself? You may change again." The angry trembling voice was loudly pitched, but Elsie's answer was whispered slowly, measuredly,

"I came and told you this because I had a dream, darling,—a dream which frightened me, although now that I am here with you I could not feel afraid——"

"I hear some one calling me."

"I heard nothing but the sheep, Agnes. My dream wasn't of you but of Precautia. I dreamed she was not dead, that she had grown up as you grew up, Agnes, that as you tried to help those whom you loved, so did she. I dreamed I saw her trying, trying, trying—and failing. I dreamed that I couldn't tell her that I saw and understood,

that I could do nothing for her but pray—and I did pray. I dreamed that I turned away from her awhile and forgot her loneliness and—tiredness. Later I found her—found her——"

"So that you wished her dead," broke in Agnes. She had stripped every leaf and blossom off the flowers, and was tearing the stalks into atoms as she spoke. "You saw her drowning, was that it? And wished her struggles at an end? I don't know why you should cry; it was only a dream, and Precautia was not saved—she will not suffer. There, some one is calling me. It is late, good-bye; it is very hot here in the sun. Good-bye."

CHAPTER XIII.

"Words are easy as the wind,
Faithful friends are hard to find."

THE lines of the two sisters had fallen in rough places. One, sick and faint at heart, toiled homewards through the blazing sunshine, hopeless, powerless, defeated; she had thought to turn the tide of a strong stream with a bunch of daphné, bound about with memories,—the stream swept on, the flowers sank.

Agnes had been misled, cheated, beguiled; she did well to be angry. Anger surged within her; it burnt, hot as the burning sunshine, withering the milk of human kindness within her. Major Wyndham had been her friend for many a day; they had talked of everything in heaven and earth, and yet he had deceived her. The torment of righteous anger maddened her; again she knew that

> "To be wroth with one we love
> Doth work like madness in the brain."

She, who had been unused to violent feeling —she, who was so meek and gentle in her ways—longed to see this false friend, longed to meet him face to face, and show him that she could feel as other women felt. When later on he came to see her she met him coldly, her troubled eyes were dark, her head thrown back, she had not a word at her command, she only looked at him. She saw, her anger did not dim her sight, that he was harassed, careworn, depressed. She was glad to see it; he deserved to suffer. Was no one in the world to feel a pang of misery but Agnes? was she to have monopoly of pain? Later on he would be happy, he would

be far off then—"Where he was would be Elsie's home," those were his words—and Agnes would be here between these walls; they enclosed her home, her *home!*—she hated it.

It was for this end she had borne the burdens of her youth; it was for this end she had served God all her life; it was for this end she had sold —ay, she had sold it bravely—her girlhood; it was for this end she had done duty, her dreary, daily duty. For this end she had been led out, blindfold, into a new summer where she had lived rejoicing; it was for this end the bandage had been torn from her eyes. These were the ways of the merciful powers that she had served so long; she rebelled against them, against her fate. The pang which rent her was not righteous anger, it was deeper, stronger than anger—an ugly word of which to learn the meaning, an ugly word to write, an ugly word to speak,—jealousy. There was no mercy for her, she looked for none. He would speak thus to Elsie all her life; he would hold her hand, not touching it lightly, quickly in friendship, but holding it warm, close, to love and to cherish, in sickness and in health.

"You have heard already?" he questioned,

puzzled, trying to read her face. "I came to tell you, and you have heard?"

"Yes."

"You think I should have told you before?"

"Yes," speaking slowly and with laborious care. "It was long ago; we were friends even then, and yet you left me ignorant,—you did not seem to care, you pretended to be indifferent."

He knit his brow; her fingers, drumming on her knees, trembled.

"I should have gone—then. I did wrong."

"You should have told me—then."

"Why are you angry with me? Wait for an hour to be angry."

"You deceived me; I hate to be deceived."

"I deceived myself, too, and now I waited until the last to tell you. I was a coward. Good-bye is a hard word."

"What good-bye?"

"You don't know?—then we have been talking at cross purposes; we have not much time for that, we can speak out."

"Yes.—What good-bye?"

"This is the last time I shall see you. I have come to take my leave of you. I am going

back to India, straight off. I sail to-morrow. I left it to the last to tell you because—well," prosaically, "because I loathe good-byes, and shirked more of it than this."

For the first moment, while he spoke to her, she was glad that he should go, go alone without —without Elsie. Then she rose to her feet and went a pace nearer to him.

"You need not go," she said, in a whisper; "you must try—again."

"Try again?" he repeated. "Tell me what you mean."

"She came to me; it was a mistake, you did not guess that when she said she did not like you that she did like you—best."

"When did Elsie come?"

"An hour ago,—no, this morning. I forget exactly when."

"I have come from her now, Mrs. Hacket. I have told her what I have told you; she is glad that I should go; she was relieved to hear that she would not see me again, that the sea should roll between such an officious friend and her—she likes me so well as that."

"You asked her to marry you, and she likes you best."

"I asked her—that's true enough; it was long ago—I could not ask her now—but she will marry St. Maur, she likes him, only him, Mrs. Hacket."

"I don't understand," in a dazed voice. "I can't understand. You don't talk like yourself; you come suddenly like this and say good-bye. laughing,—aren't you laughing? No? Why did Elsie come to me? Why did she cry so? What have I done?"

In the pause following her question, she laid her arms upon the table and hid her face upon them.

"You cannot answer, you need not, for I know."

"I can't think why she came to-day; it was bad luck, if she'd have waited, she—well, it was my fault, I should not have shirked the leave-taking. I should have gone long ago. Good-bye."

She lifted up her face, white as death, wet with tears,—a desperate face.

"No, Arthur, no, *not* good-bye—now."

"People who love each other say good-bye." He spoke quietly, gently, almost coldly.

"Don't go."

"To my duty, Agnes?"

"You have been hurt and wounded, you have done your duty, duty is cruel—all suffering."

"Fighting lasts only for a time,—and the wounds heal, Agnes."

She burst out sobbing.

"Yes, yes, you will forget; you are not as I am—a woman. Life is so hard. I have been unhappy, but not like this. You knew it by the river, you heard it then, you should have gone then. Not now—not now. I cannot bear it."

He was blind, deaf, obdurate to her despair; he spoke in calm friendship, soothingly, simply as though he talked to a child.

"Let us talk once more of the very old days, Mrs. Hacket. I remember you a little, gentle girl, unselfish, thoughtful: a serene little girl, that's what I remember—the rest I understand. I understand how dear my friendship has cost you. When I have gone, remember that I did not dream of such an end—for you. I thought you liked me being here, so I came. When I

found out why I came, I tried to break off coming; then I was fool enough to think, if Elsie liked me, I could have gone and thought of you no more. But she did not, and I stayed on. A hundred times I fixed the time for going; the result you know. Remember when I am gone——"

Her head had been bowed upon her folded arms, again she raised her face and broke in upon his words.

"When you have gone—no, no, you cannot go. I must *remember* when you have left me? I can remember now, but then I shall forget, Arthur. I can remember what I used to be—and now—and now—what am I? Why did she come to me? What have I said—or looked—that she should come to *me?* To *me,* Arthur. If I had died then. Why did you save *me—me?* It would have been better that I—that people who feel as I feel—should be dead and out of sight. Death is so quick and life is so long. I made a mistake—once—and I have——"

"Hush! you don't know what you say; between us we have distracted you."

She put her hand to her forehead.

"Does pain make people mad at first, when it is more than they can bear? But I am not mad, I can remember. At the window, where you stand—look, you can see the chimneys of home; I used to stay there and watch the smoke, and envy it because it had worked for them, and then had gone up—up, and finished with its work: it puffed up quickly—can you see it there? —but my days were long and useless. Then you came, and I—I thought of Elsie. I was glad for Elsie—at first. I did not think, I was glad. When I held you back, I thought it was for Elsie; I half believed it was for her—till then. Don't think I was so wicked—always, Arthur. I was young—I did not understand *why* I was happy."

Her self-upbraiding and her tears—when he had reckoned upon her meek acceptance of his words, when he had prepared to stem no passion but his own, when he had counted the cost of conquering himself and that alone—were hard to face with temperate quietness, but so he met them.

"I thought I could be your frrend. I tried to make the time pass pleasantly for you. I left no

stone unturned to win your friendship. I was not young, nor blind. The blame is mine. I have understood from the first. Don't try to tell me, because I know it all, Agnes."

Her face was bowed again upon her folded arms; he was twenty paces from her. It was like leaving a child alone in the dark to leave Agnes thus—a frightened, weeping child to face the terrors of the night alone—but so he left her. He could do no better thing for her than to leave her in the thick shadows whither he himself had led her, and so he left his

"dove forlorn and lost with sick, unprunèd wing."

His good-bye did not reach her ears; his kindness seemed cruel as death; she found herself alone.

Late that night Major Wyndham, for the last time, made his way to Hillsden. When Caroline opened the door she stared at him, his face looked strange under the hall lamp. No wonder he was white, no doubt he felt the parting, for he had come to say good-bye. Caroline knew all about it, her gardener kept her posted in the rectory news, she had heard that the rector was breaking his heart because his son elected to return to that fiery, black-peopled country where he

had won his laurels, and where it was impossible, no doubt, that they should fade.

This coming departure cast a gloom right and left. Mr. Max had been out of doors all the evening, Miss Elsie had never left the sick-room; now Major Wyndham, grim and grey, with a voice such as might suit a black soldier, but which offended Caroline, asked for Miss Trevor at eleven o'clock at night. Well, she had done without this gentleman about the house for many years; she, at any rate, was one woman who would not regret him.

"Miss Elsie is upstairs, sir, very tired. Mr. Max is—I'm sure I don't know where; he's been out all the evening, but may have come in now, as it's getting late."

"Tell Miss Elsie I want to see her. I will go into the drawing-room."

"It's dark in there, sir. I will fetch a candle."

She did so, setting the solitary light upon a table; bustling away and leaving him alone in that dusky room. How desolate it was, how empty, yet full, as over-full of memories as was Arthur's sick heart. He looked about him, as a man might look upon the face of the dead—say, rather, upon

a dead face which he had loved but which had wept many tears for him,—remorse embitters regret.

Ah, yes, the room was not empty to his eyes, it was peopled with those young neighbours of his whom he had thought to serve so well. He had interested himself deeply in their well-being, he had devoted himself to them; once he had considered himself their truest, most faithful friend, their consoler and aid.

Later on, those early sentiments of his had changed,—he modified them. He remained their knight, but now their knight in armour. He might suffer, he was willing to suffer in their service; his was the sort of post which seemed extremely good in his own sight, such risk as might be gave a zest to this service. The suffering should be secret, no one but he himself should guess what this genial friendship, this loyal friendship cost him—what a tremendous price he was likely to pay for the happiness which he shed round him.

In arrogant self-reliance, he did not hesitate to remain where it was his pleasure to remain; he was valiant enough to face any danger, he was ready to face death itself, if his extinction should

serve the lady whom he loved,—and whom it was not his business to love.

He was ready to die—a noble sentiment this, often mooted; but death, if an extreme, is, at least, a sharp, short service soon performed. Far easier to die than to live a life such as best serves those whom we desire to serve, when the life has to be lived in direct opposition to our desires.

The road that is paved with good intentions is smooth and easy travelling; Major Wyndham had meant well. Until that identical day his own course of action had seemed justifiable; he had had excuses, reasons for his conduct, excellent ones, all of them, but now he could not collect them into shape, they were scattered before the wind by that unhappy woman who had looked at him through burning tears, and then bowing her head had hidden her face.

As a child he had known the calm, grave eyes, the tranquil mouth, the pure, broad brow, the soft voice—all these alike had been part of Agnes. For the first time he had seen her in her womanhood, standing in the sunlight upon the altar steps. She had turned her fair and guileless face to welcome him, a sheaf of corn beside

her and a lily in her hand; she had looked like a saint in her white dress; he had thought so then, and he was the kind of man who believed in goodness and honoured it. Now he had seen her changed; he had seen her face, her tears, he had heard that gentle voice grow hard and reckless; he had seen the change—and recognised *his handiwork*.

This was what he had done for her, this was the good he had brought, this the achievement of his *love*.

What of his friendship?

He set his teeth and his eyes were wet, for of those dear neighbours one was dead. She had called upon him by name, he often seemed to hear the cry at night when all was still, she had called to him to save, to help her,—but she was dead. He had failed her. These were the great things he had done; this was the succour he offered; this was the reward of those who called upon him, who trusted him—he failed them, he failed them utterly.

And yet the reckoning was not complete; there was still another who was to pay, was even now paying, the penalty of his friendship. He heard her footfall, slow, reluctant. She came into

the room, halting far from him by the door; she shrank back when he spoke, she knew him now in his true colours as he knew himself.

"This is good-bye, Elsie."

The flame of the candle was dim—so small a light could throw most heavy shadows, in them the young girl stood.

"Yes," she said.

"I want to see Max before I go. I go to-morrow, it will be many years hence if I—if I ever see you again, Elsie."

"Yes."

"Will you fetch Max?"

She shook her head; she was extremely pale, striving, as he saw, with a pang, for her natural manner, but constrained and odd.

"He would not come, Arthur."

"Not come? Why not?"

She did not answer, but her lips twitched.

"Why not? Elsie, I am going away—surely he will come."

"*You* must go to him—not I."

"What, Elsie, have you—quarrelled?"

"Yes—he does not understand. He does not trust me."

This was as Arthur feared; he understood.

"Whatever I have done, whatever wrong, whatever harm, I did it blindly, Elsie; you believe me? I never meant it. But I'll bring no more evil to you, or yours; Max *shall* understand, I will explain; the score against me is heavy enough, for God's sake, don't force me to add to it. You shall not let me stand between you two, there shall be no concealment; I have the right to speak out, and I will speak. A word will clear it up, will set it straight; let me say it."

He could not see her face, she had averted it; but now she turned her deep, pathetic eyes upon him.

"At whose expense would you speak? Think of her *first*. The easiest way is not the right way; no, no, for the path is narrow. Think of her, she—she only thought of us, of doing good to all of us, to everyone; she worshipped goodness, and she did no good, and even she, herself, has lost so much because the path is narrow. Think of her."

"I do think of her. Of whom else should I think? Don't you know that she never leaves my thoughts. What would she wish? What would

she do if she were here and saw you, Elsie? She 'only thought of doing good.' You said it. Let me not do harm in her name; let me go to him."

Elsie made a gesture of irresolution; she went a step nearer to Major Wyndham, looking piteously into his face, with sudden self-compassion.

"I'm so unhappy, Arthur."

"I know you are. And do you think he is happy, Elsie?"

"He should have trusted me; he should not have been angry. He thinks what is *impossible,* he has no right to think it."

"*Should.* An easy word, Elsie. We *should* do many things. Sometimes *should* is too hard for us. Don't be too proud; think how he's suffering, not of the should, dear. Ah! I've no right to preach, I have preached too much; no wonder you don't believe in me."

But it seemed as though her faith in this friend was not shaken, for she did not gainsay him when he told her that he must go to Max, she did not call him back when he passed her by and hurried from the room. She stood waiting in those deep shadows which the small light threw. She waited a long while; she was young,

the memory of grief, and grief itself, was faint compared to hope, the renewal of hope is consolation.

Then feet trod the passage, and Arthur was beside her, wringing her hands in his.

"Good-bye, Elsie, good-bye, dear. Yes, it is *good*-bye now. Max is coming to you; he understands it all. When I have gone, he will tell you what I said."

He saw by her face it was a *good*-bye in good earnest to this friend of his, the only good thing he could do for her and hers.

"Write to me, Elsie. You will write? Just a line, a word. It will be something to look for at first when I am—home-sick. Good-bye, Elsie."

CHAPTER XIV.

"The rainbow,—see how fair a thing
God hath built up from tears."

SETTING aside all question of the morality of the thing, it is physically, mentally wholesome to cultivate that habit of mind which considers itself last. The selfish mind is an unwholesome mind. It is unhealthy to wander in and out the labyrinth

of personal trials continually, and to wander in no other direction. Healing medicine for a sick heart is not to be found in its owner's mind.

Agnes was unselfish enough, but her heart was sick, a malignant sickness had mastered it, the ordinary stages of the illness must be passed, the fever must run its course, the crisis must be passed and convalescence reached before wholesome habits of mind could make themselves apparent.

"Men will forget what we suffer,
But not what we do."

Suffering does not bear chronicling, it is so long, so dull, so much the same, such a repetition; we all know something of it, we are not impatient to know more, we are not eager to remember, we are willing to forget.

Mental suffering tells, it told on Agnes. She was a simple woman, not given to reasoning, not clever, nor witty, she knew but little, yet she knew the difference between right and wrong,—such knowledge as sometimes the very wise may overlook amongst vast stores of learning.

As Elsie had said, Agnes had no ambition but to help those who were her nearest and

dearest. She had meant to do good,—she had done no good,—she was not even good herself. This was the bitterness; that old, old cry was on her dumb lips from morning till evening, from dusk to dawn.

"'If I could feel as I have felt, or be as I have been,' then, then I could bear all, or anything, then I could be strong."

The sickening length of time as it crawled from sun to sun while she patiently did her duty, trying with nervous eagerness to please her husband, for ever at his beck and call. The dull, unending pain of life which whispered at her ear, even through sleep, and woke her roughly to another vacant day!

The vacancy, the pain which would not be repelled—Ah, that was the misery of it. Fight and struggle as she fought against them, knowing what they meant and loathing them as stains upon her conscience which she could not wash out with all her tears.

The strain of such a life sapped Agnes's health, undermined her strength; in the heat of hot July she drooped suddenly.

Our bodies are the close and sympathetic

companions of our minds, mental illness entails physical suffering. Agnes's illness alarmed Mr. Hacket; an invalid wife is not a possession on which any man is to be congratulated.

Nervous prostration was the name given to this ailment. Change of air and scene, occupation, amusement, was the prescribed remedy.

"Let her live on sixpence a day, and earn it," quoted the doctor to himself.

He had known something of Mrs. Hacket from her childhood, and he told Mr. Hacket that "his wife required to be taken out of herself," explaining his meaning thus.

"Change, travel, occupation will cure her,—is what she wants. Tonics are no earthly use. Take her away."

Mr. Hacket was so determined to prove the village doctor wrong that he took his wife to London for further advice, and, to his chagrin, heard a repetition of this extravagant opinion.

The doctors, as a matter of fact, prescribed "happiness," that was the best healer, the surest cure for Agnes's malady. That word was not used, the noun was veiled, but "happiness" was the tonic they meant to recommend. Science has

not as yet discovered a more invigorating remedy. There is a proverb which talks of catching your hare before you cook it,—the snare for that hare "happiness" was change, travel, occupation, the doctors considered, and they put their patient on the road leading away from self, it was the best they could do for her.

So long as Agnes could go on about her daily life as usual, she did so; though she slept little, ate little, and was always tired, yet while she could move, and smile, and talk as usual, she did so. But strength of purpose is not bodily strength, and Agnes had fainted more than once at most inconvenient moments;—a fainting-fit is an aggressive form of illness which may not be concealed.

On the Sunday following Agnes's journey to London, upon the day when, for the first time, the banns of marriage between Maxwell Victor St. Maur, bachelor, and Elspeth Mary Trevor, spinster, were called, Mr. and Mrs. Hacket were in church. As the rector published this announcement, his voice shook. How could he help it? for he thought of his exiled son, of his own hopes

which were long dead, and which now, alas! he was called upon to bury.

Mr. Hacket missed the voice by his side which was wont to chant softly and low where chanting was requisite, the voice he thought the sweetest in the church was silent, so he sang the Benedictus with a little extra zeal by way of example. He went complacently and sonorously, but with heightened tone, through the Creed before he crouched down in that deceptive, ungainly attitude the male biped assumes when he confesses his sins, or makes his sore needs known, to his Creator.

Mr. Hacket was a staunch Protestant; but he left the praying to his priest upon this burning July morning. He was lazy and dreamy in the heat, he started up when he felt a hand upon his arm. The old gaffer in the adjacent pew had leaned across to pluck Mr. Hacket by the sleeve.

"Yeu bettern cotch-awld onnur, hur's falled away," he said, not lowering his voice and pointing with his thumb at Agnes.

Mr. Hacket looked round quickly whither the thumb directed. His wife was sitting up, propped, rather than leaning, against the pew; her head

had fallen back, there was no colour either in her face or lips; her eyes were half-closed, she breathed heavily.

The whole congregation were agitated, and rose to their feet, while Agnes was carried from the church. Many fluttering and fussing people endeavoured to assist her husband to bear the very light burden in his arms, which he would relinquish to no one. Elspeth Trevor walked by his side, her steady young hand upon his trembling, elderly arm.

It was suggested that Mrs. Hacket should be taken to the rectory, and thither she was borne. The air revived her, hot though it was, and, before the wine that Jane brought had touched her lips, she tried to sit up, declaring there was nothing the matter, that she was quite well.

"She *always* says that," said Mr. Hacket, wringing his hands.

"Lie down," said Elsie; "you can't stand yet. Drink the wine, Agnes."

She drank it, but she would struggle to her feet.

"I want to go home, take me home; it will be better there;" but when she found that Elsie had

spoken the truth, that she had no power to stand or move unaided, she sank down on the sofa and began to cry weakly and quietly at first, but uncontrollably, wildly, when the busy sympathisers made efforts to comfort and to calm her. It was not until Elsie, assuming authority, drove everyone, including poor Mr. Hacket, from the room, and hushed her, but with no tenderness, that the hysterical outburst subsided.

"I never cry, Elsie, never. To-day is so hot, it overpowered me. I have not cried for weeks."

"Could you walk to Hillsden now?"

"My head swims. Give me your hand. Let me stand for a moment; I am shaky still. It is the heat; there is no air, Elsie."

"Yes, it is very hot."

"Are you sure it is only the heat? Don't you think I am really ill, Elsie?"

"Yes; but soon you will be better."

"Dr. Harding saw me alone. He asked me if I had any mental anxiety. I said, 'No,' Elsie."

"Why did you say that, dear?"

"Isn't it true? everyone would say so. Think of the changes: you are not poor, and you are happy; you have everything, and mother is no

worse at all; she will live with you. The boys are doing well; they will do better still. Max understands them, he will help them. All the things I used to dream of doing have been done, —though not by me, not by me. I have done nothing, but I have all those things for which I used to hope."

She spoke hurriedly, watching her sister. Elsie took her throbbing hand, holding it firmly between her cool palms. Agnes was unnerved, overwrought; the mask which she had worn slipped aside—she could not keep it in its place.

"You have none of those things for which you used to hope, Agnes. Do you think I do not know? Do you think I do not understand because I am as I am? Do you think I wouldn't help you if I could? Do you think I don't feel because I am of no help?"

"Hush!"

"No, for this once I must speak. You don't set things straight in your own mind; your conscience is deformed, a horror, not a help to you. You say to me that you have no 'mental anxiety' because I am happy—because the others have enough to eat and drink, and to pay their bills.

We can't live in other people's lives, it is impossible to do it. You live for ever against nature, you are not meant to do it."

"What is *meant?* I do not know; I am in the dark, the pitch dark. I cannot see a step before me."

"You never left the light; a cloud came, you are in its shadow now, but it will pass."

"But—but if I do not want to get back because the shadow is all I have now to . . . Oh, Elsie, think of Max, think *how* you think of him and want him,—I know. If he had gone—if it was wicked to think of him—wouldn't you be sick at heart, and ill, and broken, Elsie?"

"Yes," said the bride-elect, turning a little pale, but speaking prosaically, "I am fond of Max; if he went away, no doubt I should feel as you describe. Many women, I fancy, must have sorrow of that sort to overcome, or to be beaten by. I would not be beaten, Agnes."

"But I am beaten. Let go my hands, Elsie; I am the most unhappy woman in the world, not fit for you to touch."

"Not fit to touch? Is that the way you let your overgrown conscience deceive you? You

will treat yourself like a sinner; you are only a girl who has had a bad time. You think too much and do too little; we are merely human. Aggie dear, because you have discovered you are not an angel, are you going to worry Mortimer and yourself to death? Poor Mortimer."

"I try," catching her breath, "indeed I try to do my duty."

"Yes, yes, you do absolutely nothing *but* your duty, and not enough of that to fill your time; it is more lively to have something to do besides one's duty."

"Elsie, when you came to me that morning, you did not talk so lightly."

The speaker's meek and drenched blue eyes were fixed on the firm face above her. The face was firm, though the sign-post's voice was not quite as steady as her words.

"No, darling, no, but that was long ago; why keep looking backwards? Look on, be satisfied; you have not left the difficult road on which you started, you only went downhill a bit. The starting was the mistake, there is no going back; go on, uphill now. It's steep, against the collar, but later on you will get to the top and rest—and—

and see the view. Only hilly country is worth looking upon, Agnes, and most beautiful from a height. Just now, Agnes, you are tired out, the climb is long."

"I am not climbing."

"You are; we either walk up or down hill through life. I don't believe in a flat country being provided for anyone."

It was difficult to talk so loftily; to preach, and lay down the law. It was more difficult to pilot Agnes safely and unaccompanied to Hillsden, and to keep cool when they crossed the churchyard, pausing to rest a minute by Celia's grave. But Elsie did all these things naturally, and when her sister was lying down upon the little bed in the old room, when the curtains were drawn, and she had closed her eyes, Elsie sought her brother-in-law, who impatiently awaited her.

Mr. Hacket was roused, stirred into acute, exaggerated anxiety, and so dejected that he was ready to avail himself—as a lion, in its extremity, once availed himself of the assistance of a mouse—of his autocratic sister-in-law's aid, and to listen to what she had to say. Her hand was not against him now, he was aware that for the first

recorded time she was his ally, and that he wanted her alliance. If it was humiliating to be driven thus to turn to Elsie for advice, yet she spoke sensibly and with moderation, and it was far better to receive advice than—than—the consummation of his fears.

He had lost poor Jane, and had greatly mourned his loss, but he could not face the terrible dread that Agnes, dearest Agnes, might be snatched from him. When he had turned to her in church she had looked like death; for one moment he had thought that she was dead, and it was of death he was afraid.

There could be no doubt that Elsie sympathised with him, if she did not altogether share his fears. Though she said hard things to him, she spoke them as gently as his own young wife could have done; though she did not break down, yet her face was agitated, and worked while she was speaking as though she had some difficulty in keeping calm. Elsie knew what she meant to say, she said it clearly, she spoke out. He listened, answering only in monosyllables; he could no more frame one of his speeches than he could quench his apprehensions. A sermon from

an earnest preacher had been known to work miracles—such miracles as are worked in our time—and Elsie preached with eloquence, her words went home, as words will do now and again. She almost loved Mr. Hacket for his quavering voice and for his distress; above all, she loved him for his eager acquiescence in her suggestions. Her suggestions were made with tact, delicately; she did not ride rough-shod over those habits of mind which he had cultivated for a lifetime, and which were a part of himself. Her proposals were practical, and they were as inexpensive as circumstances would allow; and he, she told herself, with a flash of wonder, would have accepted them had they been far otherwise.

"He was ready," he said it brokenly with wet eyes, "to sacrifice a fortune for his poor wife."

Meanwhile, Agnes lay resting in the little white room. The light was closely curtained, and the intense heat made her drowsy. Drowsiness was new and comfortable; of late, sleep had fallen suddenly upon her from sheer weariness,—from nothing else.

She had spoken of her unhappiness. Elsie had understood and had not shrunk from her;

she had made some bracing remarks, she had assured her that many people had some such tragic sorrow to be beaten by or to beat. This ought to have been a depressing statistic, but to Agnes it was a solace. If other women, with clouds upon them, could yet meet their neighbours with smiles and cheerful greetings, Agnes could do the same. If they did not sink into invalidism, and turn from "the business of their grief" to the more hopeless business of their health, there was no reason why she should do so.

"She was only a girl who had had a bad time, who had gone downhill, and who might begin to climb again." Elsie had said these things,—in Agnes's meek simplicity she accepted this version of life; perhaps—perhaps——

In the jessamine outside the open window the bees were humming, the hot air was sweet and still; she could not think, her eyes were closed, and a gentle, dreamless sleep, such as in days gone by she had been wont to sleep in the bare room where she now lay, stole upon her.

She slept on, although the boards creaked as an old man crept on tiptoe into the room, and

though the rush-bottomed chair creaked too as he seated himself upon it, after drawing it with noiseless stealth to the bedside.

No eyes, though younger by two-score years, though less blunted to the ills of life to which flesh is heir by half a century's hard experience, could have watched with greater anxiety, or more fondly, the wan face on the pillow, than did the elderly eyes belonging to that portly, elderly gentleman.

The face he watched was young, white, very fragile, the lashes on the thin cheeks were wet, the transparent hand, curved inwards as it lay on the black skirt of her dress, was like the hand of a child, worn like the hand of a sickly child. What had made havoc with this sleeper's health? She had changed; how she had changed, poor thing.

Upon the other side of the room stood a looking-glass, which reflected the watcher, who was a fine man. Yes, a portly and successful gentleman; but—but how scanty and how grey his hair, how deep those lines and wrinkles; in this dim light, across the room, he saw them plainly, and his sight was failing,—at least, it was

old sight. He was old—he stooped—he was an old man—too old, perhaps,—no, no, not that, but somewhat old—full old—to be this sleeper's husband. Yet, was there any crime in age? It would be hard indeed if old age must live on nothing but the past. He—he did not *feel* old, for all the lines and wrinkles;—he had not felt old until he watched her thus.

Elspeth had spoken kindly, she had said none of those things which Mrs. Dawson had said, in anger, long ago, and yet she had, for some reason or other, recalled that conversation to his mind.

Then he had been in prosperity, and, consequently, unimpressionable; now adversity threatened him—he was stricken with anxiety, ready to follow, not to direct, ready for any action, if action might bring back health to Agnes. She was flesh of his flesh, part of himself, he loved her as such, he had declared to Elsie that he loved her better than himself.

She stirred at last, and he hurriedly swept the worry from his face, meeting her opening eyes with a smile—not the complacent smile she knew, but a trembling smile that was the best thing he could do.

"You—Mortimer?"

"Yes, yes, I have been here some time. You have had a nice, long nap. I've been watching you. Do you feel better?"

"Much better, thanks. I will get up now; it is late, it must be time for luncheon."

"No, no, my dear. You keep still; it's too hot to move. Stay where you are till dusk, and then Elsie will walk up to the Oaks with you. Don't think of me; I'll go home presently and have my lunch. The lamb can wait; it is cold, and will not hurt for waiting, Agnes."

She seemed glad to put her head down on the pillow, and gaze out into the room, he watching her.

"This was your old room, my love, Elsie tells me. It is an—airy room," trying to please her; "but sunny, the curtains are very thin."

"We liked the sun," dreamily. "We used to leave the blind up the whole night; we wanted to see the sunshine when we woke."

"You liked the sun? Just so, my dear. They tell me you don't have sufficient sunshine now; they tell me that you fade because I keep the blinds down when the sun shines at the Oaks.

That's metaphorical, merely my simile. My dear, in future we will pull them up; if the things fade, bless my soul, they will last out my time, never fear."

She turned her eyes wonderingly upon him; he looked odd, but he nodded solemnly, and smiled upon her.

"I'm getting on, Agnes. I'm no boy; and I'm like an old dog, content with the fireside. I didn't remember you were, so to speak, a mere puppy, ready for a game of play and full of restlessness —you seemed gentle, tame; but you are a puppy, nevertheless."

He paused, that she might laugh at his little joke; but she did not smile—she looked at him, and his own smile faded away.

"The doctors have talked to me, they gave advice from the head; and your sister Elspeth has talked to me, she gave me advice from her heart, I think; they all say much the same, and I am ready, heaven knows I am prepared to do anything and everything suggested."

His voice quavered, but he was pompous, too, because he was full of plans for his wife's happi-

ness, and he could not avoid the consciousness of his own virtue.

"Elspeth and I discussed the future. The past has not been unhappy, I trust, my dear; but the future must be brighter, more full of variety. We will go away for a little while, to London for a day or so. Elspeth has commissions for us; then to the sea, but home again for the wedding, and then—and then, my love, Elspeth fancies you would like to have your mother at the Oaks. We have room for her, ample room for her, and for Caroline, who will act as her attendant; any little extra expense will be defrayed by Elspeth—that is the suggestion as it stands. These things are trifling matters, but Elspeth says you always cared for little, trivial, daily things, and found interest in them. Nay, Agnes, are you glad? It is pretty feeling you show, such fondness for your own, such eagerness for responsibility and trouble as I had hitherto endeavoured to save you. I did not understand. Women are by no means alike; upon my soul, they differ widely. Mrs. Trevor shall have every comfort and attention, do not doubt it; and you shall be about her just as you wish, just as the fancy takes you."

"How kind you are."

"I want to see you well, my love, not worn and haggard, I cannot bear to see you look so delicate. If occupation is good for you, if change is good for you, and if society is good for you, you shall have one and all; what is the use of a purse which can't bring health? In the winter I talk of letting the house, of letting it to Elspeth and her husband. It was her suggestion, he would give a fair rent and take care of the place. He, himself, is a careless fellow, but Elspeth has common sense to spare, and she will see to what I wish,—no smoking all over the house, I couldn't permit that. Colonel St. Maur seems extremely generous to Max, but, of course, the condition is that they make their home with him half the year. When the Oaks is let, we—you and I, Agnes,—will have our second honeymoon, and spend it in travel and sight-seeing; we will be away some time and miss the English winter which, they say, might be injurious to your health. There are places to visit, sights to see, enjoyment to be had even alone with me —with me, Agnes. I must recollect that life is new to you, though mine is nearly spent. Elspeth had

no intention of doing so, but she wounded me; she made me fear I had been far from what it is my wish to be, a considerate husband; that I have not made you so happy as I thought to do. Is that true, Agnes? No, no, don't agitate yourself, I will not have you speak, bygones are bygones, let us leave ill alone. I will start fresh and try again; I am not accustomed to fail where I try. Be healthy and strong, I will grudge nothing. I don't think you realise how well I love you, or how much I am prepared to sacrifice for your benefit."

She did realise it at that moment; stretching out her hand, she laid it upon his.

"I *shall* get *strong*," she answered; "give me time."

CHAPTER XV.

"The sun has hid his rays
These many days:
Will dreary hours ever leave the earth?"

"NORFOLK STREET, PARK LANE,
"*May* 10*th*.

"MY DEAR ARTHUR,

"Who was the person who

". . . lived to the age of a hundred and ten,
And died from a fall off a cherry-tree then?"

I thought Agnes Hacket's husband would do it; in those sort of cases, old people have obstinate tenacity of life. However, his faculty for existence has failed—the only failure he has ever made, he would say himself, poor man, if he could speak. His death was in the *Times* one day last week. Influenza did for him; how it fastens on the old, and weeds them out. To-day I heard from papa, long rigmaroles about the illness and the funeral—not a word about the will; so like him. But I was curious, and I went round this afternoon to see Elspeth. The widow has *everything,* but a little fire insurance legacy left to a local hospital,—stingy people always do that; they are provident for their souls, but can't bear a wrench till they are out of the way. For an eight years' service Agnes has had most liberal wages, lucky woman.

"I hardly ever see Elspeth; she's such an eccentric person, so pleased with herself and him. Her wedding was, what they seldom are, a success. She didn't marry that deadly man hoping to turn him into anything smart and respectable; she likes him as he is, absolutely likes to have him poking down into the depth of some useless 'ology because *he* likes it. Some fogey society

allows him to tack two letters on to his name; if he'd been made duke of fogeydom, she couldn't be better pleased. Odd woman!—for she dresses well, and is better-looking than ever; with that lovely face of hers, she might do anything. She might make several people miserable, but she prefers to stagnate in her own house and make shock-headed Peter content. No ambitions! Most pretty women are Alexanders at heart; but, I suppose, when the beauty has gone the way of beauty, the husband remains, and he remains content; so, eventually, she cries 'quits,' with such women as don't waste their gifts.—Am I probing an old hurt of yours? I think not.

"We are much the same as usual: G—— is full of debates and—debentures, while I stick to gaieties and gowns to fill up my time. How it flies! do you remember that you have seen none of us for nearly eight years,—a large slice out of life, Arthur. When *are* you coming home? You seem very fond of pig-sticking and polo, of shooting and soldiering. Are you fond of nothing else?

"Your affectionate sister,

"LUCY LELY.

"P.S.—Elsie St. Maur's house was upside down; Max was experimentalising with electricity in a cupboard. I was thankful to get away without receiving any physical shock."

"THE OAKS,
"*August* 31*st.*

"DEAR ARTHUR,

"I had your letter last night; you feel as I feel, I hoped you would write as you write, it shall be all just as you suggest. No, I have never heard your name from her lips since that morning so many, many years ago. Had I heard it, don't you think I should have less cause to say 'come'? Do nothing yet, be very patient, you must not come a whit too soon. You know her; she would not be satisfied if it was not as I say. I am warning you, though you want nothing of the kind. She keeps well, as I told you, and—and she read Nat's letters over and over again; he had seen you when last he wrote. How good you are to him! The other boys are doing well. Frank likes the city, and works, so Max tells me. They are good—*for boys.* Your god-child talks of 'the brave soldier who never cried when he

got hurt.' Your example stops so many screams. She loves your photograph. She is a very sweet little person, wonderfully like Max. We go back to London next week. Since Colonel St. Maur's death we are a great part of the year out of town. Max is restless.

"Ever yours sincerely,

"ELSPETH ST. MAUR.

"P.S.—It shall be as you wish, it will be best, I will keep silence still; it is an old habit, and would be hard to break."

"DORFOLD RECTORY,

"*April 28th.*

"MY DEAREST ARTHUR,

"Though the writing of your weekly letter has been, for many years, the greatest pleasure of my life, yet how I rejoice to think that I am, for the last time, interested in the outgoing of the Indian mail, for the last time I am telling you my news on paper. Now I may store up the many things I have to say to you, and say them, God willing, within a few weeks, to your face. Writing is but a sorry exchange for speaking. No sooner

is my letter to you sealed, than I recollect how many things I had meant to tell, and left untold. Last week I forgot to say that Agnes Hacket has gone abroad with the St. Maurs. She must be glad of companionship, but Elspeth has deteriorated, she is always at the heels of her husband; it was a strange infatuation. Since Mrs. Trevor's death I have seen a good deal of Agnes; she was always a special favourite with me. Elspeth, no doubt, is the beauty, but she has become a mere reflection of St. Maur. I don't mean in appearance,—he could never pride himself on good looks, poor fellow!—but a reflection of his individuality. She dabbles in all the things into which he dips. I suppose it's all very right and proper she should; they appear to suit one another,—it was a *strange* infatuation. The two children are albinos, or very nearly so, not a look of a Trevor.

"I seldom go to Hillsden now; the Goughs are good church people, and interest themselves in the parish, but the house is connected in my mind with much that is painful; many of my former hopes are buried there—where they sprang. The place is changed, the garden in such order

and much cultivated. Talk of buried hopes,—long since they must have been dug up and weeded out. Dawkins is making a capital job of the stables; I hope you'll like what I've done. Dear, dear! what is the use of wishing, when I shall see you so soon? You have been such a regular correspondent, I do believe I shall miss your letters even when I have you here.

"Your affectionate father,

"CHARLES ROY WYNDHAM."

Those letters had long gone sailing over the sea; the latest of the three had reached its destination, and its author was waiting, busy waiting for his son. Busy waiting,—what busier, harder work than waiting? What weary work, for time irritates us by its tardiness; the memory of the many disappointing "waits" of the past makes a background of anxiety. And yet, as "Aunt Judy" suggested, many years ago, to the little Victims, "It is better to wait for your dinner than to have no dinner to wait for."

For many months the Oaks had been empty; its mistress, in company with Elspeth and Max, flitted from town to town on the Continent on a

long architectural survey. Caring little for column or pillar, fluting or tracery, arch or arcade, buttress or bulwark, yet Agnes was drawn into the St. Maur enthusiasm for such studies. So apt and tutored a student was she in the womanly art of merging her inclination in those of her companions that she almost persuaded herself that the curve of a Gothic or Norman arch "was worth the world" to gaze upon, and that to prowl in cathedrals and churches built with hands was preferable to standing in the sunshine in the valley of the Tyrol. She had grown into the habit of sheltering her life—concealing it, even from her own observance, behind the lives of neighbours; it is a popular mode of living. Agnes was much liked.

When Max and—consequently—Mrs. Max had drunk their fill of architecture, they suggested a return to England, volunteering their company, for some summer weeks, at Dorfold. Agnes was glad to have them; her capacity for gladness had been so little cultivated that it was a feeble capacity compared with that of her sister, yet she *was* glad.

Agnes's life had been lived at Dorfold; her

childhood, her girlhood, and the rest. Travelling was not new to her, but it was tiring, it had associations which were saddening; she was glad to go home. Eight years, with noiseless, industrious, invisible fingers, accomplish many changes —eight years had turned the Oaks into home. There she had had the heartache, but there she had found rest. There, within those walls, she had done good. At last she knew it, for her husband

> "Had blessed, in his dying, the bleak winter-tide,
> When he was a bridegroom and she was a bride."

As the travellers turned through the lodge-gates into the drive, Agnes leaned forward to the carriage-window and looked across the grass upon her home. Roses climbed the Tudor windows, myrtles and passion-flowers were trained over the broad porch; the elaborate stone-work, the hot red bricks were alike mellowed by time and half-veiled by the creeping plants; time works such wonders—time, that had built home for her; time, that might some day hide its emptiness.

Agnes saw through a mist; she was tired, worn out with travelling in the heat of that hot

day. She sighed—why should she sigh? she was not alone—what could she want who had so much beside her? She turned to Elsie and put out her hand towards her; it was a drooping, languid hand, which wanted a strong hand-clasp about it, but Elsie did not see it, she happened to be looking at her husband. She was not tired out; her "merry heart went all the day." It was not her fault, but she was thinking of Max; she saw no weak hand which wanted help. So Agnes leaned still more forward, and waved the neglected hand to the group of servants gathered at the porch to welcome her.

Later on, during that same evening, Mr. St. Maur sat writing, slowly and laboriously, at the library-table, his mind concentrated on his page, his forehead puckered with much thought and by a short-sighted effort to see, his head a wild dishevelment, his eyeglass in his eye. He was enjoying himself in his own way, and was loth to be disturbed even by Mrs. St. Maur, who came in stealthily, closed his ink-stand, placed it out of reach of his pen upon the floor, and seated herself in its vacated quarter extremely near his papers and his notes.

"Now, Elsie, why did you come? I thought you were with the children."

"You *hoped* I was with the children, that is your meaning. I am not, I am with you."

"You are not invited, you *must go*."

He was smiling, though ruefully, as he said this; for he understood that she was not going, and when she looked as eager and as beautiful as she was doing just now it was against nature —even husband-nature—to wish her to do so. If she obeyed him, he should be glad; if she did not, he could make the best of it.

His wife was not placid, occasional storms disturbed the domestic harmony. Storms in tea-cups as heretofore, nothing serious, nor did they concern him very seriously, for his was a masterly hand skilled to soothe the troubled elements. And, if the storm should blow him away from his favourite pursuits for a day or two, a change of programme was wholesome. He took life easily; it is easy to take a pleasant life pleasantly.

"Now, Elsie, go," he said; and he added, when she shook her head, "Then make haste and tell me what it is, for I am busy."

"Don't be disagreeable, Max. Do I *ever* disturb you for a trifle? Do I *ever* worry you when you are writing?"

"Hardly—ever," he replied, with moderation.

She wore a loose dress of some soft silk which changed colour in the folds, here deep red like the roses that she was wearing, there sapphire blue.

"That's a pretty dress, Elsie. What is it? how on earth do they change the colours? Let me look close."

"No, Max, leave it alone, I want to speak to you."

He peered at her a little anxiously,—she spoke so low.

"Get off the table, I won't touch the ink. Come round here in the light where I can see you. Nothing wrong, I hope, dear?"

She came over where he bade her, and standing behind him smoothed his rough hair with her hands. He felt that her fingers were chilly and tremulous. Then he rose and looked into her face. She was pale, and leaned against the arm he put round her.

"What have you done, Elsie? You are

ashamed of yourself. What is the matter? My dear girl, you are crying—my blind eyes told me nothing. You frighten me. What is it?"

"I did not tell you, Max, I couldn't, for she did not know,—nor—nor anyone. Arthur Wyndham is here, he came back yesterday; he is here, in this house. I told him to come. An hour ago I went to meet him, I brought him to her; it was too sudden, it was cruel of me. I had not told her, she did not know. She did not say a word, she went towards him; before I came away I saw *her face.* Oh, Max, I'm very glad you were not there to see it. Poor Agnes. That is why I am—I *am laughing,* Max. Why should I cry, now?"

THE END.

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